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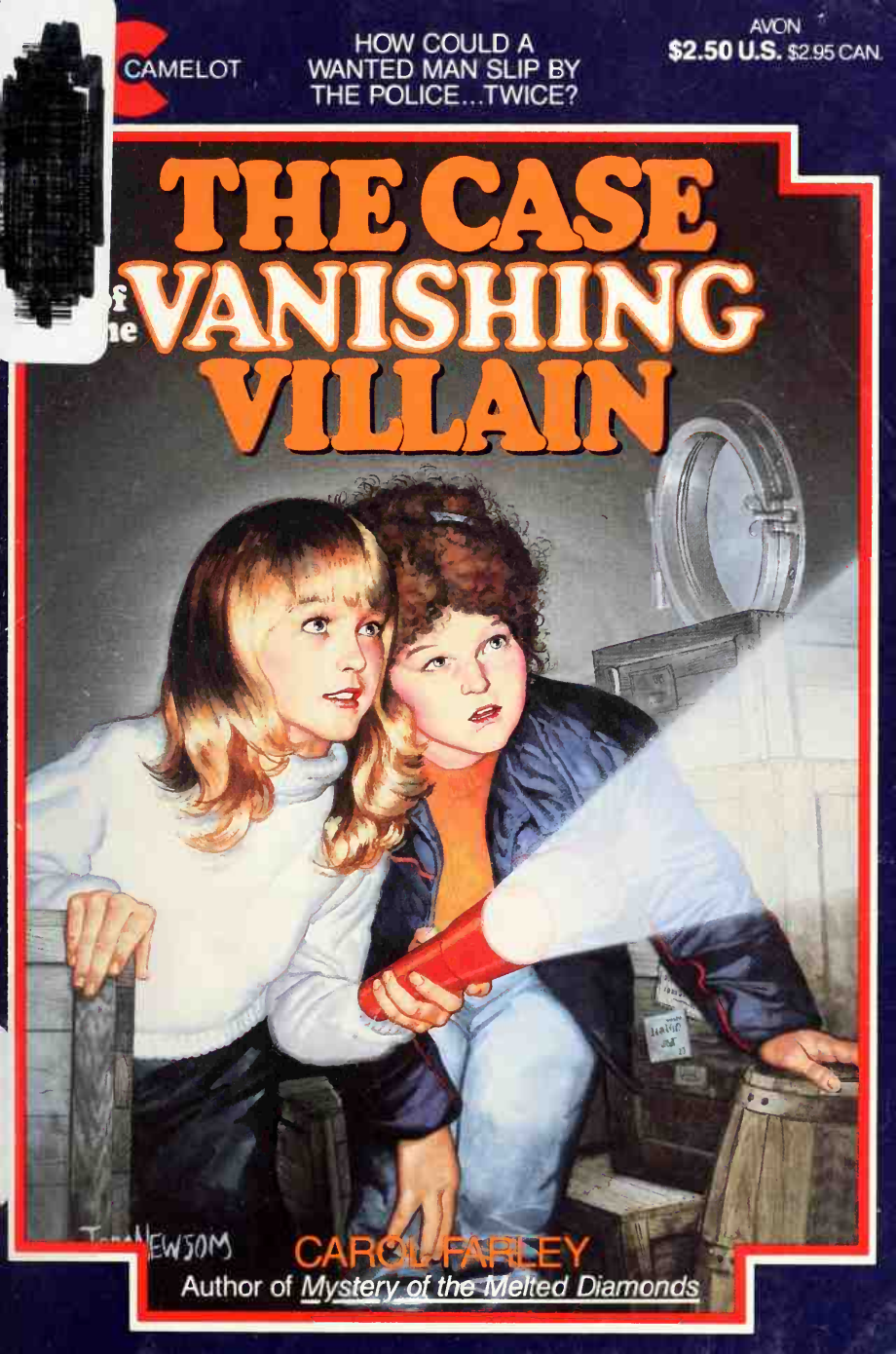

CAROL FARLEY
Author of *Mystery of the Melted Diamonds*

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THE CASE of the VANISHING VILLAIN

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THE CASE OF THE VANISHING VILLAIN

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CAROL FARLEY is the author of many books for young readers, including MYSTERY IN THE RAVINE, MYSTERY OF THE FOG MAN, THE MYSTERY OF THE FIERY MESSAGE and THE MYSTERY OF THE MELTED DIAMONDS, all Avon Camelot books. Carol Farley and her younger sister crossed Lake Michigan many times, but, much to their disappointment, they never solved a mystery aboard the car ferry. She and her husband, who now live in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, have four children.

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THE CASE of the VANISHING VILLAIN

CAROL FARLEY

Illustrated by Tom Newsom

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

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This book is for
Dorothy Trebilcock
because she often tries to solve
baffling mysteries with me.

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The Challenge

I need your help. If you like mysteries and you think you're pretty good at solving them, then you're the person who can help me.

My name is Flee Jay Saylor and I'm twelve years, six months, and ten days old. My whole life I've wanted to be a detective. I've wanted to solve a mystery that had baffled everybody else in the entire world.

The incredible thing is that I really had the chance to do it. Last spring a prisoner escaped from jail and tried to get out of Michigan by taking a car ferry to Wisconsin.

I was on that car ferry. Norris Rawlings suddenly appeared and then he vanished. A lot of mysterious things happened in between, but they never made any sense to me.

They did to Clarice. She's my ten-year-old sister, and she drives me bonkers. One minute she talks like Einstein discussing the laws of energy, and the next minute she's saying, "Nanny, nanny, boo, boo. You can't do what I do." Life with a child genius is difficult.

It's been even more difficult since she solved that mystery on the car ferry. "You'll never be a real detective, Flee Jay," she keeps telling me. "You don't have the brains. I figured out the right answers last spring because I used logic just the way a real detective would."

"Nobody normal could have figured out that case," I tell her. "You only solved it because you're so blasted nosy."

"Nanny, nanny, boo, boo. You can't do what I do," she answers.

The last time she said that to me, I had this sudden idea. What if I wrote about the whole mystery exactly the way it happened? What if I wrote about everything we saw and heard during that ferry trip? What if I put down every clue and every suspicion, and I described every character? Then a reader could be right there the way we were, and have a chance to solve the mystery exactly the way we did. If readers end up as confused as I was, I'll know for sure that it was just an accident that Clarice solved the case.

You're reading this book now, so you must like mysteries. You must be smart enough to find some answers too. I wonder if you would be able to figure out how and why Norris Rawlings did the things he did on that car ferry last spring. If I tell you everything,

you'll have a chance to figure it all out too. That would be fair, wouldn't it? Then you could be there exactly like a real detective, exactly the way we were.

I guess I'd better tell you all about us first, so you'll get the full picture. Even though Clarice and I are sisters, we're not at all alike. Clarice is the female version of King Midas in that old fairy tale. I mean that everything she touches seems to turn to gold. When she talks to adults, she says exactly the right thing, and if she sees a glitter on the sidewalk, it's usually a quarter.

My tongue seems to get tangled when I talk to anyone over twelve, and my glitters on the sidewalks all turn out to be bottle caps. Clarice and I don't look alike either. She always looks sparkly and shiny. Her knees and elbows never get scraped, and she never has to worry about her complexion. She's exactly the right weight and height for her age. Physically speaking, Clarice is perfect. Can you believe this? Her name actually means "bright."

I'm a long way from perfect, and as you've probably noted, my name is rather strange. Just before I was born, my mother was reading a novel that had a heroine named Felice Jennifer, so that's what she named me. That's not so bad for somebody in a romance story, but in real life, people get nicknames, especially people who are more ample than usual. As soon as I started to grow (breathing oxygen makes me gain weight), my parents saw that "Filly" would be a terrible nickname for me, so they started calling me Flee Jay.

It's a good thing. I'm not keen on being called Flee Jay, but it's a lot better than being named for a horse. I may look like one, but I don't want it advertised.

Weight, you see, is a problem for me. I'm not really gross or anything. I mean, I couldn't pose for one of those "before" ads for weight-loss clinics. But I couldn't pose for an "after" picture either. There's a lot of waste in my waist, and my thighs are a little too much attached to my knees. So I weigh a bit more than the average. But a lot of those pounds come from all the metal I'm wearing on my teeth.

The clothes I wear are probably like the ones you have on. I like blue jeans and shirts, jogging shoes and plain socks. Clarice likes lace, pink dresses, and black buckle shoes. She has lace on her collars, lace on her sleeves, and lace on her anklets. If she had any more lace, she'd be mistaken for a walking doily.

She has dimples, I have pimples. Her hair hangs in long golden splendor, mine frizzes up like a rusty scouring pad. But I'm gradually fixing up all those surface problems. When my braces come off and my face clears up and I lose a little weight, I'll be doing just fine.

So now that you know the two of us, I'll tell you exactly what happened. I'll give this report a title, just like a real book: *The Case of the Vanishing Villain*. Don't read the ending first, because that would be cheating. I'll be fair with you if you'll be fair with me. I'll give you every clue we found and some we only suspected. I'll try to make you feel the fear and the misty eeriness creeping around that car ferry as we bungled our way across Lake Michigan with an escaped convict on board. I might exaggerate a little bit, because I was so scared; I'm admitting that right now. But even so, I know I won't be able to have you feel the full emotions I felt.

Still, though, you'll be able to turn back pages to check on clues, and I couldn't do that in real life. I'm going to come right out and give you some important facts too. It took Clarice and me a long time to find out about all the other passengers, for instance, but I'm going to introduce them to you in nice, easy order. You can see that I'm going to help you all I can.

I'm even going to wish you good luck in getting the right answer now, as you begin to read this story.

I can do that because I feel pretty sure that you're going to need it.

So . . . Good luck!

The Escaped Convict

"It's fun to be up in the middle of the night."

I stared at my sister in the flickering shadows of the waiting room in the Grand Channel car-ferry dock. Even at this awful hour, Clarice looked as perky as a parakeet with a new mirror. I was wilted and wrinkled, but she was prim and perfect. She peered up at me from beneath her straight bangs. "Don't you think so, Flee Jay?"

"Not unless you're a vampire," I told her. Frowning, I clutched our canvas overnight bag more tightly against my chest and stared out the window. The fog was so thick I could barely see the lights of the *Soaring Seagull* docked just a few dozen yards ahead. The foghorn was moaning and the mist was swirling across the graveled yard. There was a damp, fishy smell mingling with the aroma of diesel oil, and I felt as grumpy as one of the Seven Dwarfs. I'm usually a cheerful, fun person. But not before dawn.

I shifted position on the wooden bench and wondered how many thousands of passengers had sat there waiting for passage to Wisconsin before us. Probably none of them had been as grouchy as I was. But then none of them ever had to put up with a sister like Clarice at that hour either.

She nudged me and nodded at the closed door behind the empty ticket counter. "What do you think Mr. Woolsey is doing in there with those policemen?"

Yawning, I shrugged. Right after Mom had left, I had noticed that two policemen had come inside, but I hadn't much cared.

"Want to go listen at the keyhole?" Clarice whispered.

"Honestly!" I glared at her. "You are absolutely the nosiest person in the whole wide world!"

She sniffed. "Not really. You couldn't possibly know just how nosy the other four billion seven hundred sixty-one million nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine people in the world are."

"What?" I said. "What?"

She stood up and carefully smoothed down her dress. It wasn't wrinkled, but Clarice is superneat. She always says my clothes look

like they came from a ragbag. "That's how many other people there were in the world at last count," she told me.

I didn't argue. Arguing about numbers with Clarice would be like trying to empty Lake Michigan with a teaspoon. I watched her pick up the huge black purse she had bought at a yard sale for ten cents (definitely overpriced, in my opinion). It was shiny and black, with rhinestones on the handle. Clarice liked it because it was big enough to hold all her notebooks and her small bottle of rubbing alcohol. Clarice writes everything down and files it in alphabetical order. She uses the alcohol to disinfect things when we travel.

"I'm going to the ladies' room," she said.

I leaned back as she went into the tiny room next to the ticket office. Her purse dangled nearly to her knees, a portable library encased in black plastic. I was sure her fact about world population was in one of the notebooks crammed inside. She even had a flashlight rattling around on the bottom. If the electricity ever failed, she could read anyway. My own purse was small and sensible, stocked with useful things like combs, brushes, and beauty aids. Unfortunately, none of them worked.

The waiting room was drafty. I shivered and studied the calendar hanging on the wall. It made me think of Mom, because it was from the Grand Channel Bank, and that was where she worked.

"If I don't get a bit of sleep, I'll never be able to count money this morning," she had told us a few minutes earlier. "Would you girls mind if I went on home? Mr. Woolsey said he'd be sure that you get on board all right."

"Yes, indeed, ma'am, you can be sure of that!" Mr. Woolsey had nearly saluted when he told Mom that. He's been the steward on the *Soaring Seagull* for years and years.

Even in the middle of the night he looked all spiffy and shiny in his navy-blue uniform. The first time I had seen him, I had thought he was a general in an army somewhere. His gold buttons glittered, and he stuck his chest out far enough to threaten the threads that held them. The crease in his pants could have cut through butter. The captain and the other crew members looked positively frumpy beside him.

"I'm so sorry I woke you too early," Mom had said as she started to leave.

"They'll be fine, fine," Mr. Woolsey repeated loudly, hovering over us, rubbing his hands, adjusting his hat, and patting his bushy mustache. "We won't be having too many passengers this early in the shipping season. Why, I'll be able to keep both eyes on them all the way across the lake!"

I wasn't sure I wanted even one eye on me, but Mom looked grateful. "Their grandparents will be at the dock in Milwaukee. I've purchased tickets with a stateroom, so the girls can sleep the whole way if they want to."

"Fat chance!" I said, but nobody heard me. Clarice was saying that she didn't plan to sleep, because she wanted to test early-spring wind velocity and humidity on one of the Great Lakes. I should have known she'd want to test something or other. There wouldn't be much sleep for me. Even if she didn't talk my ears off, there would be the scratching of her pencil in rhythm to the rise and fall of the waves.

Mom had finally left, sure that Mr. Woolsey was going to watch our every move. The moment the door closed behind her, he sat right down next to us, all eager to do his duty. "So! Do you young ladies have boyfriends?" Before Clarice had had a chance to give him a piece of her mind—she has plenty to give away, and she does it often, especially when people ask about boys—the policemen had come in.

I glanced toward the closed door now, and I wondered what was going on inside. They had been talking to Mr. Woolsey and the ticket agent for a long time. It would have been fun to think about something exciting happening, but Grand Channel isn't exactly a hotbed of crime. Our police don't do much except give out tickets for parking or barking, depending on whether you have a car or a dog.

Just as I was staring at the door, it opened. "We'll be outside," the fatter policeman said. He and Mr. Woolsey might have been bookends, except that Mr. Woolsey was a bit shinier. "I'll go up and talk to the captain myself."

Mr. Woolsey looked all flushed and important. He smoothed down his mustache and adjusted his hat as the ticket agent went behind his counter again and the policemen walked outside.

"Important business," Mr. Woolsey said to me. "Some important

business. Don't you bother your pretty little head about it, young lady."

I was just starting to worry about Mr. Woolsey's eyesight when the door opened again and two old people came in. He hurried over to beam at them. Long ago I had figured out that a ship steward's most important duty is beaming. Mr. Woolsey was good at that.

"Flee Jay!" Clarice slid onto the seat beside me. Her voice was all trembly, and her eyes were sparkling. She was grinning from ear to ear. "Guess what, Flee Jay, guess what!"

"The bathroom had soap, hot water, and clean towels," I answered, because that was the kind of thing that made Clarice happiest when we traveled.

"No," she whispered, scooting even closer to me. I could smell the rubbing alcohol she had probably used to kill germs in the bathroom. "There might be an escaped criminal in Grand Channel!"

I stared at her. "You're crazy."

"I mean it," she said. "That's why the policemen were here. A prisoner escaped from a jail sixty miles from here, and they think he's going to try to get out of Michigan. He might try to take this car ferry over to Wisconsin!"

"What prisoner?" I asked. "What jail?"

"His name is Norris Rawlings. He stole cars and robbed grocery stores. Anyway, he was in the Junction County Jail, waiting to be taken to the state prison after his trial, and he escaped just a few hours ago. Nobody knows which way he went."

"Really, Clarice? Really?" I leaned closer to her. This was exciting news, all right! Mr. Woolsey was busy talking to the old couple, so I glanced toward the open door leading to the office. "Are the police here to see if he gets on *this* car ferry?"

"Yes," Clarice said, her voice all gaspy. "This Norris Rawlings might try to get on the same boat *we're* getting on!"

My heart started hammering. All my whole life I'd dreamed that I might solve a crime that had baffled all the police force, exactly the way detectives do in books and on television shows. I got all excited thinking that maybe *I* would be the one to find out where this prisoner was headed. Then I came back to reality. This was dull old Grand Channel, and sometimes Clarice thinks she hears more than she really hears.

"You're making it all up."

"No, I'm not," she whispered. "I heard every word they said in there. Honest I did."

"How?" I asked. "You were in the bathroom. You weren't anywhere near the keyhole."

She clutched her purse handle and wiggled her feet back and forth. "Can't a person accidentally overhear something? If she's in a room right next to another room, can't she accidentally hear what's being said?"

I looked toward the ladies' bathroom. It was right next to the ticket agent's office. "Through the wall?" I whispered.

"Through the air vent near the ceiling," she whispered back.

My mouth dropped open. "But that vent is way over your head. How could you accidentally overhear anything through there?"

"I stood in the sink," she said, carefully patting her bangs into place.

"Honestly!" I moaned and stared at her. "Clarice, one of these days you're going to get into a real mess because you're so nosy."

"I did already," she answered. "Just look at my anklets. One of the faucets dripped on the lace, and now—"

"All right, now," Mr. Woolsey suddenly shouted in our direction. He looked like a general commanding his troops. "You young ladies can get on board. I'll have you settled before the other passengers arrive. I promised your mother I'd see about you, but we have some other mighty important things to think about before we leave, you know."

We knew, all right. But Mr. Woolsey had no idea just exactly how much it was that we knew.

My skin felt all creepy and crawly as we walked across the dock toward the *Soaring Seagull*. The fog was clammy, and I was half hoping and half fearing that the escaped prisoner was lurking in the shadows all ready to jump out at us. The fish smell was even stronger now, and I could hear the water sloshing against the poles in the harbor.

As we drew closer to the dock I shivered, glad that Mom had made me wear a jacket even though I'd complained. Clarice was all bundled up in a bulky white sweater. She wore it all the time, but it never seemed to get dirty.

Mr. Woolsey unlocked the chain fence blocking the entrance ramp. Then he took a stateroom key from the little shed there on the dock. "You two girls will be in room four," he said, handing the key to Clarice. "I'll wait here until you get on board. The lounge is empty now, so you can sit in there or go right to your stateroom."

"We're going to wait on deck awhile," Clarice told him. She stuffed the key, with its plastic holder, into her black bag. She bounced onto the gangplank, and the loud thud echoed in the mist. I felt the wooden boards sag under my weight as I followed her. Since the cargo deck is at water level, the passengers all have to struggle up a ramp to get to the main deck.

I clutched the swinging rope guardrail with one hand and our canvas bag with the other. "You'd think they could come up with a better way to get people on board," I muttered as Clarice and I moved toward the ship.

"The *Soaring Seagull* is one of the best ships operating between Michigan and Wisconsin," Clarice declared. "It has the finest—"

"This ramp soars faster than the ship does." I felt dizzy from the smells and the swaying. "I may be seasick even before we get on board."

"No, you won't. Dad says that Saylors never get seasick."

"That's just a joke." I staggered up the last two steps and hoisted myself on board the ship. I dropped our bag and grabbed the deck rail. The metal felt cold and wet under my hand, but at least the floor wasn't moving back and forth.

"What's a joke?" Bouncing up beside me, Clarice whirled around and waved to Mr. Woolsey down below. In the dim light I could see her gold hair swing and then arrange itself in perfect order. My hair had turned into a damp frizzle the minute the fog hit it, and now it simply frizzled more.

"It's a joke about our name. Saylor is our name, and a sailor is a person who sails on boats. But one doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the other. See what I mean?"

"No."

I sighed. Trying to explain a joke to Clarice is like trying to get a turtle to use a toothbrush. She simply doesn't see a need for one. She's so logical that she has to find a purpose in everything, even puns.

She nudged me. "Mr. Woolsey wants you to wave too. See? He's waving at us."

"Astronauts on the moon could see him waving at us," I told her. Looking down, I moved my hand back and forth, like Queen Elizabeth in a parade. Clarice was waving bye-bye like a baby does.

It was strange seeing all the people below gathering on the dock. The harbor lights made blurry yellow holes in the fog, and everyone seemed to be moving in a hazy underwater dimness down below. Only the metal caught the reflection of the bright lights strung all across the yard. I saw Mr. Woolsey's uniform buttons glitter, and when the two policemen near him turned a certain way, their badges reflected the glare too.

"See?" Clarice whispered. "Those men are going to watch all the passengers come on board. I heard them describe that Norris Rawlings. He's short and skinny. Only five feet two, and just a bit over a hundred pounds." She turned to me. "That's way below the national average, you know. Men here are lots bigger, although in Asia—"

"Maybe he'll try to get on board with the crew or the cargo," I said, "and nobody will see him."

Clarice shook her head. "Mr. Woolsey called the captain from the ticket office. The whole crew will be on watch."

I slumped. All my fantasies about being a great detective seemed dumb. If the entire crew was going to search for a possible stowaway, why did I think I might find him? Besides, with those policemen

watching every passenger come on board, there wasn't a chance that an escaped prisoner would try to sneak on.

"I'll bet Norris Rawlings isn't going to try to get out of Michigan on a car ferry," I mumbled. "I'll bet he's heading for Chicago in a nice heated car." I sighed and shivered again. "It's getting colder here on deck. Want to go inside the lounge?"

"Nope. I'm going to stand here until everybody has come up the ramp."

I glanced at the lounge door, chained open behind us. The dim lounge lay yawning beyond it. On the dock the crew had started loading the cargo. Cranes were hoisting boxes on board, and the whole boat was shaking as cars clunked and clanked up to the car deck.

"I wonder if they'll show a good movie in the lounge," I said.

"Remember the last one?" Clarice grinned. "It was terrific!"

I groaned. "It showed the life cycle of a fish, from the egg to the dinner plate. You call that good?"

"Sure. Or maybe we could play video games with Mr. Woolsey."

"That's worse than the fish," I mumbled. "It's going to be hard having him flutter over us like a mother hen this whole trip."

"A rooster," Clarice said. "Hens are female."

I glared at her. "I know that! Honestly, Clarice, can't you—"

"Mr. Woolsey just unchained the fence," she told me. "Let's watch all these passengers, just in case one of them is a short man who weighs around a hundred pounds."

"Anybody who is that skinny *ought* to be in jail," I mumbled, but Clarice was too busy arranging her notebook to listen.

She licked the tip of her pencil. "Looks like Mr. Woolsey didn't rent all the staterooms this trip."

I shrugged. It always annoys me that Clarice is so afraid of getting germs that she lugs disinfectant wherever we go, yet she licks her pencil tips that way. Maybe she has to do it because she writes so fast and furious that she has to cool the lead to keep it from melting.

Down below, Mr. Woolsey was tipping his hat at a few people moving toward the ship. Passengers who rent staterooms get to come on board first, so he has a ceremony to make them feel special. Mom had rented a stateroom for us, but I don't know why—I don't need to feel special. The lounge had everything we needed—a

television set, plenty of plastic sofas, some game tables, and a well-stocked snack bar. Who needs anything else?

Clarice says she does. She says she needs her privacy. It's for sure that she values it—she never gives any to anybody else.

"I'm glad that our stateroom has a porthole," she told me now. "There isn't any place to hide inside those little rooms. All the staterooms with bathrooms will be across the hall from us."

"Don't worry." I folded my arms and stared at the first figure moving onto the ramp. I was sure there wouldn't be any prisoner hiding on board, but I was secretly hoping there might be a few cute boys making the trip.

An Invisible Passenger

"Lionel! Lionel!" a woman was shouting through the mist. Our first passenger was hurrying behind a yipping dog. He was one of those long-haired little ones whose teeth and eyes stick out. His leash was dragging behind him, and he was ignoring it the same way he was ignoring the shouts from the woman.

As soon as his toenails clicked on the deck, the dog ran right up to my knees. I thought he was going to bite me, but he just drooled and snarled around my kneecaps. The woman hurried on deck and grabbed him into her arms. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes, but—" I started to tell her. Then I realized that she was talking to her dog.

"Poor Lionel," she said, hoisting the dog up to her shoulder. She balanced his feet on her travel bag as she marched to the open lounge door. Lionel snarled at me over her shoulder until they were both out of sight.

"I would have bitten him, but I didn't want to get hair in my braces," I told Clarice.

She was scribbling into her notebook. "Did you see how much the two of them looked alike, Flee Jay? Both were little and skinny and crabby, and both had straggly gray hair. Lots of times people have dogs who look like them."

I thought of our dog at home, all plump and squat, with short, curly, rusty-colored hair. "I suppose you mean that Ginger and I look alike, huh?" I asked, but two more passengers were coming up the ramp, so Clarice never answered.

The man and the woman were the same old couple who had come into the ticket office earlier. In their big coats and hats they looked like explorers dressed for the North Pole. The man had a beard, and he was wearing dark glasses even though the sun hadn't even thought about rising yet. They both were carrying small suitcases.

"Can you direct us to room one?" the woman asked.

"After you go through the lounge right inside this door, you'll see the corridor to the staterooms," I told her. "Room one is the first room on the left when you get into that corridor."

"Go through the lounge!" the man shouted. Clarice nearly dropped

her notebook at the sudden booming noise. "It's the first room on the left when we get into the stateroom corridor!"

The woman smiled in my direction. "I'm half deaf and my husband is half blind," she said, "so we help each other."

As they went into the lounge Clarice leaned closer to me. "They're like Mr. and Mrs. Jack Spratt because—"

"I know why," I interrupted. I was just about to tell her that I didn't need all her constant explaining, when a little kid started yelling.

A woman was coming on board, and she had a baby strapped to her back. She was carrying a large suitcase. Even in the fog I could see that her face was worn and tired. "You're okay, Jason," she was saying. "You're okay."

He didn't seem to think so, because he was screaming and hollering with a voice so loud that if the shipping company had heard him, they might have dumped the foghorn and hired the baby. When he saw me looking at him, he flung back his arm and threw the stateroom key he had in his hand. It bounced on the metal deck.

"Oh, Jason!" the woman said. As she bent to get the key the baby's face was even with mine, so I crossed my eyes and stuck out my tongue. He was so surprised he stopped shrieking. He was still staring at me behind his mother's shoulder when they went through the door.

I learned to do this trick when I baby-sat with the kid next door to us. It's my theory that babies get sick of people smiling at them and so they fuss because they're bored. They like seeing new expressions.

A priest and two strangely dressed women straggled up next. The priest was a short, plump man who was walking with real purpose. I could see that he knew exactly where he was going in this life as well as in the next. He used too much hair spray on his bushy hair, though. It almost looked like plastic as he passed under the overhead light.

The two women were wearing robes that resembled long gray sheets. Their hands and their faces were almost completely covered. I wasn't sure what country they were from, but I didn't want to ask Clarice. I knew she'd not only know the country, but she'd tell me the political system it had and all its major exports too.

We heard the next three passengers before we saw them. "Now,

let me know if you want to stop, Mother," a woman was saying. "Just let me know. This is heavier than we thought it would be, so I know you must be tired."

A parade of three females came staggering through the fog. They were carrying a long rug, all rolled up and wrapped in paper. All of the women were wearing slacks and jackets, and they were bent over with the weight of what they carried. The woman near us was about the age of my teacher, who was just out of college. I thought the lady in the middle was about forty-five. The one in the back seemed to be the youngest.

I stared at the middle-aged woman because she looked so much like the principal in my school. When she spoke, her voice even sounded like Mrs. Bowen's, all high and raspy. She had the same little half-glasses our principal wears, with a chain holding them around her neck. The kids say that Mrs. Bowen would forget her head if it weren't hooked on, and the kindergartners believe that the chain truly does hold her head to her body. I could see right away that this woman forgot things too.

"Emily, I'm so worried," she said, panting. "I think I left my purse in Uncle Harold's van."

"I have it here, Mother." The woman in front was right beside us now. I saw that she had a purse slung over each shoulder. One was zipped and neat-looking, and the other was baggy and stuffed with so much that papers were hanging every which way. I knew instantly which one belonged to the older woman.

She was right beside us now, straining to lug her portion of the carpet. "But rooms five and seven? I forgot to ask if they had portholes there. And the keys! Where did I—?"

"LeeAnn has them, Mother. You gave them to her downstairs. And we don't have portholes in our staterooms. You said you wanted the ones with bathrooms."

By this time all three women were on deck. They paused a moment, catching their breath. Now I could see that the youngest one had hair as frizzy as mine, so I felt instant sympathy for her. I knew that the woman named Emily probably was her sister, and she seemed to have hair as perfect as Clarice's. I wondered if she was a genius too. I moved closer to them. "Do you need any help carrying that rug?"

Emily shook her head. "No. No, thanks."

Her mother hadn't heard me. "Just think, girls. We paid half as much in Grand Rapids for this Oriental rug as we would have had to pay in Milwaukee. Wasn't this a marvelous bargain, LeeAnn?"

LeeAnn shrugged. I could see that she wasn't all that thrilled about buying something for the house, so I knew we had another thing in common.

Clarice pointed her pencil at their purchase. "You could have put that down in the cargo area."

"Good heavens, no!" The oldest woman jerked to a stop. "I want this carpet right beside me. We paid a fortune for it even if it *was* on sale. Thank you just the same, but we can manage, we can manage." Panting, she lifted her third of the rug a bit higher, but it still seemed to sag. "Let's go, girls. Oh my! I hope I put that scarf in my purse. When we left—"

"I have it, Mother." Emily glanced back at me with a hopeless look. Gradually they bumped and thumped their way into the lounge.

A tall, nervous-looking man came hurrying up the ramp next. He had a suit and tie on, but he looked damp and wrinkled. He had a long beard stubble too, like my dad gets when he decides he won't shave on weekends. He was flapping his hands and shouting to two men who were lugging a huge trunk up the ramp behind him. They could hardly keep the trunk from hitting the deck. It looked as though the big man had chosen the skinniest, weakest crew members to lug his luggage aboard.

"Hurry up, men," he was saying. "There's a big tip for you if you get that trunk to my stateroom without any damage."

The crewmen clunked the trunk down right in front of me. One man wiped his forehead with a dirty cloth, while the other stood trying to catch his breath. "He's got a trunkful of rocks," he whispered to me. "Can you beat that? Carrying rocks to Wisconsin to study, he told me." He bent to lift the trunk again. "Ah well, at least room two isn't that much farther."

The whistle on the top deck sounded then, nearly blasting our eardrums out of order. At the same instant Mr. Woolsey unchained the other exit on the dock so that the lounge passengers could come on board.

Clarice and I stepped back as they all trooped past us. There were

about thirty people, and they were all sizes, ages, races, and genders. Most of them looked sleepy and damp, and all of them carried suitcases, travel bags, or blankets.

I said I'd be fair with you as I wrote down everything. I can't tell you exactly who these people with lounge tickets were, but it doesn't matter. Here's the absolute truth: Norris Rawlings did not come on board with any of the lounge passengers, so you can forget all about them.

There wasn't a single cute boy among the whole crowd, so I forgot them, too.

But unbeknownst to us right then, Norris Rawlings was now on board.

A Quick Review of the Characters As Seen by Flee Jay Saylor, Girl Detective

Flee Jay Saylor.....an almost-thirteen-year-old who has a few temporary flaws but is otherwise absolutely perfect

Clarice Saylor.....a ten-year-old genius who drives normal people bonkers

Mr. Woolsey.....a ship steward who looks and acts like a general

Mrs. Potter.....a thin older woman who loves her dog

Lionel.....a dog who tries to bark his head off but unfortunately never succeeds

Mr. and Mrs. Jack Spratt.....a couple dressed for the North Pole

Jason.....a bored baby

Jason's mother.....a tired woman

Two nameless women.....people dressed in clothing from another culture

The priest.....a man who knows what's what

Mrs. Wiggins.....a woman who would forget her head if it weren't attached to her body

Mother of

Emily Wiggins.....who is older
LeeAnn Wiggins.....who is younger

Mr. Dillman .....a man with a secret

Norris Rawlings.....the astonishing escaped convict who is able to move through locked doors, prisons, walls, and halls while remaining absolutely invisible

PLUS a cast of dozens of others!

As soon as all the cargo was loaded, the crew started untying and tying chains and ropes. The ferry whistle gave another blast. Mr. Woolsey came hurrying up the ramp while men below unlatched it from the dock.

"What?" he shouted when he saw us. "Are you girls still out here? It's cold and wet on this deck. You'd better get on inside the lounge now."

"But we wanted to see if that escaped prisoner got on the boat," Clarice told him.

Her words stopped him cold. I mean, he froze. Usually Mr. Woolsey is in constant motion. He waves his hands, he talks a lot, and he's extra big everywhere, so something is always in action, even if it's only his chin. But now he stood staring at us without moving a muscle. Then his mustache started quivering over his open mouth, a nervous caterpillar hanging over an open pit. "What? What're you talking about?"

"We accidentally heard the police telling you about Norris Rawlings." Clarice tucked her notebook back into her huge purse. "We wondered if he might try to get out of Michigan by stowing away on this car ferry."

Mr. Woolsey's eyes and buttons popped as he drew a deep breath. "But I didn't want the passengers to even hear of such a suspicion! Especially you two girls. I don't want anybody frightened! I told those policemen that—"

"But we aren't scared at all," I interrupted.

"We watched everybody get on board," Clarice said. "We don't think he came up with any of the passengers."

Mr. Woolsey straightened. "Of course not! And he didn't get on with the crew either, so there's no need to worry." He cleared his throat, then bent closer. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this business to anybody else, girls. People can—"

He was stopped by another big blast from the car ferry. The whole boat started shaking and groaning. Quickly he unlatched the lounge door, then looked back at us. "Coming inside now?"

I zipped my jacket tighter, because I knew the best part of the

trip would take place in the next minutes and I wanted to stay right where I was. "We'll be inside soon." As the lounge door slammed shut behind him, I grabbed the railing in front of me. Clarice took hold of the railing too, and we both looked out toward the dock.

I'm not sure exactly what Clarice thinks, but I love the sound and the feel of floating off into the water on a huge ship. No matter how many times I've been through it, I always think the boat will sink the minute we leave the dock. Feeling it grab the water and begin to skim across the waves is like watching an elephant suddenly jump up and begin dancing ballet. It seems absolutely impossible, but absolutely terrific. I don't want to talk to Clarice about it because she'd tell me all about volume and buoyancy.

As we started inching out into the harbor, the hull rubbed against the wooden supports of the pier. There was a terrible screeching sound, like a woman screaming, as we scraped the huge posts. Under our feet the deck shook and the huge motors roared. Then we were free of the land and moving off into Lake Michigan.

As the harbor lights faded in the mist, the huge metal clamp which had been lifted so that freight could be stored below was loosened. It made a wild shrieking sound, metal against metal, as it fell to secure the cargo deck. The whole ship shuddered.

Now we were going faster, speeding through the darkness, through the waves, the water sloshing against the sides of the boat. The fog was still thick, but I could easily see the yellow eye of the lighthouse over on our left. A few harbor lights flickered faintly in the fog, growing smaller as we moved. The foghorn was moaning and the ferry whistle blasted one more time. Then we left the land and were on the open water. I took a deep breath and relaxed, glad that Clarice had been quiet for a few moments.

"Now we can go inside," I told her. She nodded and stuffed her notebook into her purse as I bent to get our canvas bag.

When we stepped into the lounge, I was glad no cute boys had decided to travel to Milwaukee. I felt damp and wrinkled, and I could tell my hair was a frizzled mess. I patted it down, but I knew my efforts were hopeless.

For a moment I stood blinking in the doorway. After the darkness of the deck outside, I needed to get my eyes back to normal.

The huge room looked like the waiting area of an all-night bus depot. People were flopped all over the plastic sofas and chairs,

most of them trying to sleep. There was a smell of stale cigarette smoke and old coffee. Straight ahead of us I saw the corridor leading to the staterooms. Over to the left there was a snack bar, but it was closed now. OPEN AT 7 O'CLOCK, the sign there said. I knew that meant Wisconsin time, so it would be hours before I could get a candy bar. My stomach felt hollower just thinking about the long wait.

Clarice nodded at the chairs lined up in front of the television set over to our right. "They'll be starting that movie soon. Going to watch?"

Yawning, I glanced at my watch. It was 5:20 Michigan time, 4:20 Wisconsin time. We'd been up for over an hour, and it was still dark outside. I tried to see out the lounge windows, but it was like trying to peer into a black fishbowl. "Let's take our bag to our stateroom first. What room are we in?"

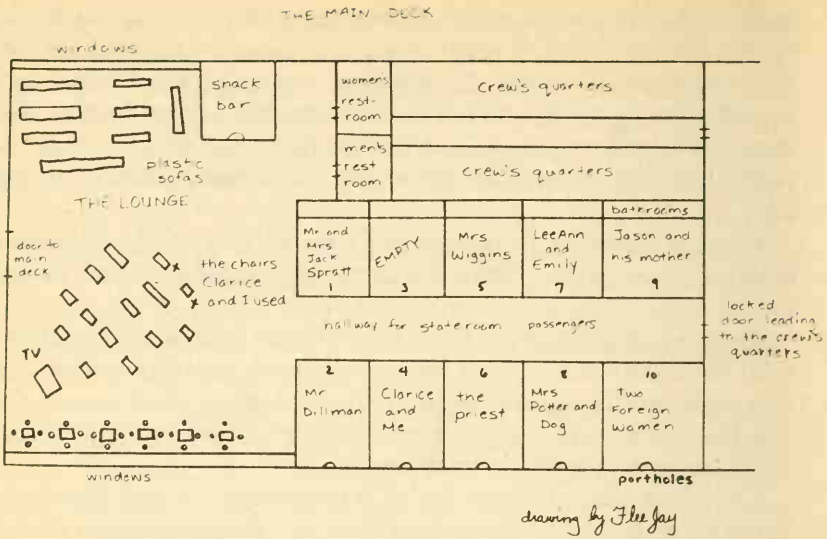
Clarice dangled our key. "We're in room four. Mr. and Mrs. Jack Spratt are in room one, the lady and her two daughters are in rooms five and seven, the mother with her baby is in room nine, and the priest is in room six. The lady with the dog is in room eight, and that man with the heavy trunk is in room two. Those foreign women are in room three or ten, and the other one is empty."

"What?" I pulled our bag off my shoulder and stared at her. "How'd you know all that?"

Clarice tossed her head, and her long hair, already miraculously straight and dry despite her recent turban of fog, fell into obedient lines. "You were there—you ought to know. If you paid more attention to what's going on, you might—"

"No lectures, please. How'd you know?"

She talked as we moved through the lounge. "The woman with the dog was waving her stateroom key when she bent to get Lionel, so I saw it. The old couple asked where room one was. Little Jason threw their key right at our feet. While you were sticking your tongue out at him, I looked at it. The lady who forgot everything said she and her daughters were going to rooms five and seven. The priest had his key stuck up right there in his hand. The man carrying that big trunk said they were taking it to room two. You and I are in room four. The only two staterooms left are rooms three and ten, so those women in the sheets have to be in one of them. The other room is empty."



I tossed my head, and my frizzled hair stayed exactly where it was matted in place. "I knew all that," I said. "I was just testing to see if you knew it."

The moment we stepped into the stateroom corridor, I heard that ugly dog bark behind the door to room eight, exactly where Clarice had said he would be. I pretended I didn't notice, but I noticed that she didn't notice that I hadn't noticed. She was fumbling with our key.

Even with the bright lights overhead, the stateroom corridor seemed dark and gloomy. It reminded me of a tomb, all closed in and slightly damp. There were five closed doors on each side. A locked door at the very end led to the crew's quarters. Only Mr. Woolsey had a key to that.

"Finally!" Clarice opened our door and flicked on the overhead lights.

Our stateroom smelled like old jogging shoes. The room was shaped like a gigantic shoebox. In the bright light it looked empty and dull. I hurried over to open the porthole while Clarice let down one of the beds. It squeaked as she pulled it down, and the metal legs clunked against the floor.

I dropped our travel bag beside the porthole and stared out into the wet darkness. There wasn't a sign of lights from shore now.

"Hand me my purse, will you, Flee Jay?" Clarice was sitting on her bed in a pretzel position. "I want to write a few more observations."

I shook my head as I tossed it to her. "You won't have anything exciting to write about *this* trip. This boat is totally safe."

She licked the tip of her pencil. "The people on the *Titanic* thought they were on a safe ship too."

I sighed. The *Titanic* had hit an iceberg, and hundreds of passengers had died as it sank. Years and years later divers had found it deep in the ocean. Clarice could have told me exactly how many feet under the water it was, but I didn't ask. Instead, I looked out the porthole again. As the fog swirled and the water sloshed, I wondered where Norris Rawlings was.

In less than ten minutes I was tired of sitting in the stateroom. For nine of those minutes I had fiddled with my hair, but I finally gave up and put my mirror and comb back into my purse. "I'm going to the lounge," I told Clarice. "Maybe the movie is ready now. You can sit there and write about this boring trip as long as you want to."

She'd been scribbling the whole time, so she wasn't much company. Being with Clarice is like reading a dictionary: all the words are there, but it's hard to put them together to make a good story. Either she says nothing at all or she says a lot more than you want to hear.

Clarice peered up at me. "I'm not writing about the trip now, Flee Jay. I was just writing down strange words. Did you know that some words have the same pronunciation and they're spelled the same way, but they have exactly the opposite meanings?"

"No," I said, reaching for the stateroom doorknob. I didn't care either, but I knew she was going to tell me anyway. She collects words the way other kids collect stickers.

She slid off her bed. "Like the word 'overlook.' A balcony overlooks a park, and that means it makes it easy to see. But if you overlook a fact, that means you didn't see it at all. I wonder how people ever get the right meanings to words."

"I'm trying to overlook your crazy comment," I told her, "and I think my meaning is perfectly clear."

We opened the door quietly, but the ugly dog heard us anyway. The minute the latch clicked he was barking, but he stopped as soon as we turned away from the stateroom corridor into the lounge.

Mr. Woolsey was standing near the snack bar. He tipped his hat back when he saw us. "I was just about to tap on your door and ask if you wanted to watch the movie. It's all set up now. You two all settled into your room?"

"We had to fight off that dog in room eight in order to get down the hall," I said, gesturing behind us.

His rosy face creased and his mustache quivered. "Mrs. Potter's dog? Why, she assured me that he would be perfectly quiet."

"He's barking his head off," Clarice said.

"Unfortunately, he hasn't succeeded yet," I added.

"Is he bothering the other stateroom passengers?"

I shrugged. "We didn't see any."

"Well, if nobody else is complaining, I guess it can't be too bad." He rubbed his hands together as though that were just one more complicated problem he had managed to solve. "Looks as though this will be a quiet trip. I told those officers that Norris Rawlings wouldn't be on this ship, just as I told you. See? I was right. Everybody is perfectly happy here." He waved his hand at all the sleepy passengers sprawled on the furniture around us.

"Everybody looks wilted," Clarice said.

"Well, we have a stateroom left—room three is empty. Anybody who wants to rent it can sleep there in peace and quiet. Luckily, we have plenty of space this trip, so nobody can complain about the lack of facilities. I was even able to give two rooms right next to each other to that Mrs. Wiggins and her two daughters. Nittery woman, wasn't she? And did you see that big rug they carted on board? Wouldn't even hear of putting it in the cargo area. I tried to talk some sense into her, but she was determined."

He beamed and rubbed his hands together. "Well, enough of this chatter," he declared, as though Clarice and I had done all the talking. "I have some duties with the crew now. Enjoy the movie, girls. It's good. I chose it myself."

I stifled a groan. If Mr. Woolsey recommended it, I knew it would be awful. He waved, then stepped into the corridor. Lionel barked until he was all the way down the hallway.

Clarice pointed toward all the chairs lined up in front of the television set. A few sleepy people were settling into the first few rows. "Where do you want to sit, Flee Jay? It's not good for your eyes to sit too far back, you know. We'd better move up near the front."

Maybe it was because of her advice, or maybe it was because I looked so awful, but I didn't feel like parading in front of anybody else. I plopped down in one of the chairs right beside the corridor. Sighing and adjusting her purse, Clarice sat down beside me.

The television set gave out a few static blasts, and the violin music began. "Oh, bummer!" Clarice groaned. "It's going to be a love story."

She was right. I always wonder how the human race ever knew

how to fall in love in the eons we existed before violins were invented. It seems that all love stories in the movies need sad music wailing out from behind potted plants.

The movie turned out to be even dumber than I had feared. Two passengers in front got up and walked off, but I was too sleepy to move. The vibration of the motors was a droning throb beneath me, and the boat was swaying in rough waters now. The lounge windows were still black. I blinked and yawned, trying to stay awake. Clarice was all balled up in her chair, covered with her big sweater. Back and forth we swayed, back and forth.

The movie got quieter and quieter as the lovers stared more and more into each other's eyes. A full orchestra played soft music as the man and woman danced in an empty room.

Then, just as I was about to doze off, it happened.

Suddenly, directly behind us in the dull, soggy stillness, a scream came echoing out of one of the staterooms. It was so high-pitched and terrified that the hair on the back of my neck stood straight up. I never thought things like that happened in real life, but they do. It felt as though a snake had just slithered right up my spine.

Clarice and I jumped up and whirled around. The corridor was absolutely empty. Then we saw Mr. Woolsey throw open the crew's door at the end of the hallway. He stopped an instant as the screaming continued, louder than before. Then we all three started running, and the dog started barking. The screams were coming from room five.

The door to room seven flew open. "It's Mother!" Emily Wiggins shouted. She bolted over to the next door. "What's the matter? Mother? Open the door!" Her bare arms banged on the panels.

By then the passengers from all the other rooms were flinging their doors open too. I saw Mrs. Potter standing with her dog clutched in her arms. He was barking like crazy, trying to get away. The two foreign women were in the crowd at one end, and Mr. and Mrs. Jack Spratt were at the other. People from the lounge had come running too, but they were crunched behind the stateroom passengers.

Then LeeAnn squeezed in beside her sister. Her clothes were all wrinkled, as though she had fallen asleep with her jacket on. The screams from inside grew fainter.

"I'll use my passkey," Mr. Woolsey shouted, fumbling with his key ring.

Then the boat hit a huge wave and we all careened sideways, nearly hitting the opposite wall. The screams stopped abruptly. We all righted ourselves again, stateroom passengers all mixed up with lounge passengers. Mr. Woolsey finally located his key again. The silence in the stateroom was even more scary now than the screaming had been before.

Everybody was talking and shouting at once. "Hurry! Hurry!" Emily kept saying. "Mother must be in terrible trouble."

Finally Mr. Woolsey turned the key and threw the door open. At that moment the boat lurched again in the opposite direction. We fell into the dim room like a row of dominoes toppling over. Mr. Woolsey's hat fell off. All of us staggered, trying to stand upright again.

"Mother!" The two women leaped to the bed along one wall. Mr. Woolsey elbowed people aside and finally managed to flick on the overhead light.

Mrs. Wiggins's stateroom didn't have a porthole, but otherwise it was the same as ours. Only one bed was down, and she was in it. Stretched the length of the other side of the room was that big carpet of hers, but it was half unrolled now and the wrapping paper was torn off. A few packages were scattered about, and a chair was in front of the closed bathroom door.

Mrs. Wiggins, without her glasses, was cowering on the bed with a blanket clutched up around her chin. She was staring at us, trembling and trying to catch her breath. "A man!" she managed to gasp out. "A man was right here in this stateroom."

Mr. Woolsey bolted to the bathroom door. It seems crazy now, but all I remember is that I was surprised he had a bald spot on the back of his head, noticeable only now because he didn't have his hat on. He nearly knocked over a short, thin man standing by the wall. Even a skinny midget couldn't have hidden in that tiny bathroom, but Mr. Woolsey searched it carefully. "Nobody here," he declared.

Clarice and I were wedged tight against Mrs. Wiggins's daughters near the bed, so we heard her hoarse whispers. "I took a sleeping pill and I fell asleep. Then suddenly I heard rustling and rattling.

When I opened my eyes, there he was! A man was in here standing beside this bed!"

People behind us were shoving and pushing. "What'd she say? What happened?"

Emily whirled around. "She saw a man in here. He must have run out when she screamed."

"He didn't run in my direction," Mr. Woolsey said. "I was just coming from the crew's quarters, and I heard her scream as I opened the door to the corridor. Nobody was running my way."

"We were coming from the other way," Clarice burst in. "Nobody was running that way either."

Mrs. Wiggins put her hands over her face, and her words were muffled. "Then I don't know what happened to him. But he was in this room. I saw him."

For a few seconds everybody was silent. Then Mr. Woolsey cleared his throat. "Then where is he now, madam? Where is this mysterious intruder now?"

In the sudden silence, nobody had an answer.

We all looked at one another, half expecting, I guess, to see an invisible man emerge from thin air. By that time people were crammed against the walls, and some were teetering on top of the heaped-up rug. I saw the man who had come aboard with the big trunk standing in the corridor, peering over the heads of everyone in front. When he saw me looking at him, he backed away. Jason's mother was there too, talking about how she'd thought the boat was sinking when she heard the screaming.

"She was dreaming, that's what," a man near me said. "Sleeping pills can give you crazy dreams."

"She could be loony," a woman whispered. "The world is full of crazy people."

"Nobody should leave a stateroom door unlocked," somebody else said.

Mrs. Wiggins grabbed LeeAnn's arm. "I know I locked that stateroom. How could a man get in here? Oh, girls, this is awful, awful!"

"She's as nutty as a fruitcake," a man mumbled.

"But I heard him!" Mrs. Wiggins cried. "I saw him!"

Emily moved closer to Mr. Woolsey. "Can you make these people leave? They're upsetting my mother."

Mr. Woolsey snapped into action. Somehow he'd managed to find his hat, and now he plopped it back on his head. "That's enough now, folks," he boomed. "Excitement is all over now. Everybody out."

Still whispering and mumbling, people shoved their way through the open door. Clarice was watching them as though they were bugs under a microscope. I tried to study them too, but I wasn't sure what to look for. They looked just like what they were—a bunch of tired, wrinkled travelers. But suddenly an exciting thought had jumped into my head as I looked at that rug, so I stood next to Clarice and hoped Mr. Woolsey wouldn't make us leave too.

Mrs. Wiggins was sniffling into a tissue as the last stranger left. "Sometimes I forget things, and sometimes I lose things. You know that, girls, and so do I. But I never see someone who isn't really

there. It was a man. Right in this very room. He was wearing a white shirt. He wasn't very big, and—"

She stopped and pointed at the far wall. "What happened to my rug?"

In the puzzled silence, I heard the sound of the passengers in the hall, the dog yipping, and the motors throbbing. I wanted to blurt out the wild idea that had popped into my brain, but Mr. Woolsey spoke first.

"Why, nothing has happened to your rug, madam. It's right there."

Mrs. Wiggins moved to sit on the edge of her bed. "But who unwrapped it? Who untied it? I know I locked that door, girls. I know I locked that door. This man must have given somebody else a key to my stateroom!"

Mr. Woolsey's mustache quivered. "Madam, I can assure you that—"

"Your father's shirt!" Mrs. Wiggins pointed at a crumpled bag. "I had it in that bag, and now it's gone! That man must have stolen it!"

Emily moved closer. "Perhaps it's in another bag, Mother."

"No, no. I remember distinctly putting that shirt in a bag on top of the rug. Oh, this is awful, awful! That terrible man unwrapped my rug and took your father's shirt!"

"But that would be foolish, Mother. Nobody would break into your stateroom and unwrap your rug. Perhaps you looked at it yourself after you'd taken your sleeping pill and now you've forgotten that you did it."

Mr. Woolsey looked relieved. "That may be exactly what happened. I know that carpet means a lot to you, madam. And well it should! Well it should! No doubt you wanted to get another look at it and admire it before you went to sleep."

"But I *saw* a man in here!" Mrs. Wiggins's voice rose above the whispering her daughters were doing. "I saw his white shirt and—"

"Mother." Emily leaned down and took her arm. "LeeAnn and I think you've had a bad dream here. Come, now—let us help you get settled in our stateroom. You'll feel better over there with us." She straightened and looked over at Mr. Woolsey. "I'm sure this purser will fix up that rug and lock your stateroom."

"Of course! Of course!" Mr. Woolsey said, beaming them out

the door. The moment it shut behind them, he sank down to sit on a corner of the bed. He took off his hat and rubbed his fingers across his forehead. "What a nightmare! What an ordeal!"

"I've had the craziest idea!" I blurted.

"Did you think Norris Rawlings came aboard concealed in that rug?" Clarice asked.

I should have known that she'd have the same idea. I whirled around to Mr. Woolsey. "Couldn't he have done that?" I asked. "Couldn't he?"

Mr. Woolsey heaved a huge breath. "Well, now... well, now..." He mopped his face again. "It *did* cross my mind, I have to admit it. But then I realized it was impossible, absolutely impossible."

Clarice had been prowling around the room. "I wonder exactly where they bought this rug," she said. "And when."

"No matter. No matter. I tell you, girls, nobody could have come inside concealed in that rug." Mr. Woolsey stood up and rubbed his hands together, back to the picture of a man in charge. "We mustn't let our imaginations run rampant, girls. Didn't we agree that nobody went running from this room when Mrs. Wiggins screamed? So obviously nobody was in here. The woman was dreaming, that's all. We all have nightmares now and then."

"I don't," Clarice said, thumping the wall beside Mrs. Wiggins's bed. "Isn't the next stateroom empty, Mr. Woolsey?"

He had just bent over to roll up the rug, so his rosy face was even redder when he looked up. "Why, yes, it is. But what's the difference? There's no way to get in there from here. No way at all. Unless you go out into the hall, of course."

I looked at the tiny air vent near the ceiling. "And nobody could climb through that."

Clarice prowled around the room again as Mr. Woolsey and I tied up the rug. She stopped and looked down at us. "When we all rushed in here, could a man have jumped behind this door as it was flung open? There might have been room between it and the stateroom wall. Could he have just joined the crowd later and nobody noticed because of all the excitement?"

Mr. Woolsey blinked. "Just let me think back," he said. His mustache quivered.

"The boat lurched," I said. "Remember that? When you unlocked the door, we all fell inside because the boat jerked in that direction."

"But only Mrs. Wiggins was in here," Mr. Woolsey said. He glanced toward the wall. "But I suppose a man might have been behind the door when it fell open. Now I can't remember exactly how things looked in here. I just can't quite remember."

"I remember," I said, "and I think that—"

Clarice snorted. "Are you certain you know what our mailman looks like, Flee Jay?"

With my mouth still hanging open, I glared at her. "What does that have to do with anything? Of course I know what he looks like! I see him every day on the way home from school, don't I?"

"What color shoes does he wear?"

As she stood waiting for my answer I sprained my brain trying to imagine the mailman's shoes. "They're brown," I said. "Or maybe they're black."

She grinned. "Nanny, nanny, boo, boo! See? You don't really *look* at anything. Most people don't. Most people don't even remember the color of the inside of their refrigerators. So don't be so certain that Norris Rawlings wasn't in this room."

Mr. Woolsey cleared his throat. "There's a big difference, my dear, in noticing a pair of shoes or noticing a grown man. No, you can mark my words. I'm sure of it now. There was no escaped convict in this room. It was a bad dream, that's all, just a bad dream. Let's move along and mind our own business now, shall we? No more worrying about all this foolish nonsense." He opened the stateroom door, and his smile faded into a frown. A gray cloth fell over the threshold. "What in the world is this?"

Clarice bolted forward and swooped it up. "It's a man's shirt," she said, holding it up.

For one second I stared at it. The shirt was small, dirty, and wrinkled. I caught my breath as an idea squeezed my chest. With one motion Clarice and I both grabbed for the collar. My mouth dropped open when I saw the words stenciled into the fabric: PROPERTY OF THE JUNCTION COUNTY JAIL.

"The prisoner!" Mr. Woolsey whispered, sinking down on the side of the bed again. Clarice and I stared at each other as the door swung shut again.

"Norris Rawlings must have stolen that white shirt so that he could look like the other passengers," I finally said.

Mr. Woolsey nodded. "The captain will have to see this shirt to believe it," he whispered. "In all my years of shipping, I've never heard of such goings-on. How did that man get on board? How did he get in and out of this stateroom?"

"And how did he drop that shirt by the door?" Clarice asked. "It wasn't there when those women left a few minutes ago."

Her words sparked Mr. Woolsey into action again. He jumped to his feet and flung open the door, then looked up and down the hall. The dog began barking as he rushed toward the lounge, Clarice and I right behind him.

The old man from room one was standing at the end of the corridor looking into the lounge. "Did you just hear somebody in this hallway?" Mr. Woolsey asked him.

The man nodded. "Why, yes, I believe I heard a door open or shut."

Mr. Woolsey moved closer. "Did you see who it was?"

Even as the question left Mr. Woolsey's lips, we all knew the answer. I couldn't see the old man's eyes behind his dark glasses, but I saw him stiffen. "I'm afraid I don't know," he said.

"Of course, of course," Mr. Woolsey said, all flustered.

"Bummer! Our only witness is half blind," Clarice whispered as Mr. Woolsey went on and on apologizing.

I looked over by the chairs we had left when the screaming started. My jacket was tossed on the floor there. Somehow Clarice had managed to throw her sweater neatly on the back of her chair. Her purse and notebooks were piled beside it. "Guess we'd better get our things," I said.

Clarice had just stuffed the last notebook in her purse when Mr. Woolsey hurried over to us, the gray shirt still dangling from his hand. "I'll go speak to the captain about this. The crew will scour this ship with a fine-tooth comb. Don't you worry. They'll find that Rawlings fellow! *Nobody* is really invisible. Maybe Captain Utz

will want to talk to those women about that carpet." He shook his head. "What a strange business this is!"

"Now should we tell other people about Norris Rawlings?" Clarice asked.

Mr. Woolsey nearly swallowed his mustache. "Certainly not! Don't breathe a word of this to anybody, girls. We don't want to frighten the passengers. The crew can handle everything. If people suspected a prisoner was loose on this ship, why, there's no telling what they might do. There might be absolute panic."

"But everybody could help search," Clarice said.

Mr. Woolsey frowned. "You can't catch a mouse with a herd of moose stomping after him."

"And I wanted to search for him too," I said.

He stuck out his chest, and his buttons popped in my direction. "Now see here, young lady, there will be none of that! No, indeed, none of that. You two girls get right to your stateroom so I know exactly where you are. I'll be checking there in just a few moments, so you'd better be where I expect you to be." He frowned one more time, then stomped off, a moose after a mouse.

Sighing, Clarice clutched her black purse tighter. "I suppose this means that I can't go out on deck and study the wind and the waves."

I glanced toward the lounge windows. Streaks of light showed through the damp blackness, and the mist had turned to a drizzling rain. The movie on the video was just ending. The sappy violin music was playing to an empty house. Most of the passengers had wandered over by the snack bar. The old couple were moving back to the stateroom corridor with their coffee cups.

"We might as well take some breakfast to our stateroom," I said. "You can hang out the porthole to do your study. I'll go get us some food."

"Bring me some hot chocolate, will you? And something nourishing. None of those gooey things you buy for yourself. Get me a bran muffin if they have one." She neatly folded my jacket over her arm. "And don't forget the napkins. Get plenty of napkins. I'll take this stuff back to the stateroom."

With her commands still ringing in my ears, I joined the line of people waiting at the snack bar. Gradually I realized that the man in front of me was the passenger who had come aboard with the

huge trunk. I felt my heart start to hammer. Here was my chance to be a real detective! Maybe, I told myself, maybe he had seen someone in the hallway near that shirt. Mr. Woolsey had been so busy talking to the blind witness that he hadn't thought of talking to anybody else.

I stared at the back of his head for a moment, trying to work up my courage. Finally I tapped him on the shoulder.

He whirled around so fast he nearly lost his glasses. His stringy hair fell across his broad forehead. "What?" he blurted. "What?"

He was so jumpy I forgot what I was going to say. "I—I—I was just wondering if this was your first trip to Milwaukee."

"Yes," he said, looking quickly in all directions. "Er—no. I mean, I live there."

I could see that he was even more tired than when he had come on board. His clothes were more wrinkled and his beard was thicker. "Did that screaming wake you up?" I asked.

"What screaming?" He blinked at me a moment, then ran his hand across his bearded chin. "Oh, you mean that woman who had the nightmare. No, no, I haven't been asleep."

I looked down toward the stateroom corridor, then blurted the big question as quickly as I could. "When you came to get in line here, did you see or hear anything in the hallway?"

For a few seconds he stared at me as though I had lost my mind. I could feel my face getting all hot. Then he shrugged and answered. "That dog was yipping. That blind fellow was standing right at the corner near the lounge. I noticed one of those foreign women in the hallway at the end of the corridor." He narrowed his eyes, then nervously scanned the room. "Why do you ask?" His eyebrows arched. "Is somebody in trouble? Are they going to check the staterooms?"

"Oh, my sister and I were just playing a game," I assured him, but he didn't look very convinced. He was next in line to give his order, so I didn't have to add anything more. It was a good thing. I couldn't think of anything more to add.

"He was *weird,*" I told Clarice a few moments later. "The whole time I was talking to him, I kept thinking he was looking around to see if anybody was watching him. He sure is a jumpy fellow!"

She reached up and took her hot chocolate. "And he said that one of those women in the long robes was in the hallway?"

"Yes!" I sat down, spilling some of my chocolate on my jeans, but I didn't care. "Maybe one of them knows something about that shirt, Clarice. I wonder if I should go ask. Wouldn't it be something if I could find out where Norris Rawlings was hiding?"

Clarice took a small sip, then dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. She can't stand having a possible mess on her face, and I'll bet she uses more napkins in one day than other kids use in a week. She reached over and dabbed at my jeans. "What did that man buy at the snack bar, Flee Jay?"

I stared at her. "What?"

"What did that man buy at the snack bar?"

Her question still didn't make any sense to me. "He bought a bag of ice. But—"

A tapping sounded at our door. "It's probably Mr. Woolsey," I said as I moved over to open it.

Emily Wiggins was standing there in the dim quiet of the corridor. "May I come in?" she asked. "Please. I've got to talk to someone before I lose my mind."

She looked so pale and scared that I reached forward and yanked her inside. "What's the matter?" I asked. "What's the matter?"

Emily sat down on the other corner of the bed, right across from where I was perched on our only chair. For a few seconds she just sat there looking down at the floor, while Clarice stared at her from the other end of the bed.

I felt queer having her sit there so quietly while my head was bursting with all the exciting things I wanted to shout about. I wondered what she'd say if I told her that an escaped prisoner was on board and that his shirt had just been found right outside her mother's stateroom.

Finally she pushed back her long hair and sighed. "This is crazy. Crazy! But I've got to tell somebody. I've been thinking and thinking about that man my mother said she saw in her stateroom. There's a way he might have gotten into that room, but it's so bizarre, so weird . . ." She took a deep breath and looked off toward our porthole. "But I've just got to tell somebody, and I thought of you two kids."

Her voice was so low that I had to lean forward to get the first words. Clarice reached for her pencil.

"We live in Wisconsin," Emily began, "but we have relatives in Michigan, and that's how this whole mess started. Uncle Harold has a large van, and he knew we wanted to buy a good Oriental rug. He saw an ad in the newspaper about a big sale in Grand Rapids, so he called us and said he would leave his van in the boat docks at Grand Channel so that we could come over on the car ferry and use it. Uncle Harold and Aunt Grace were going on a trip, so they sent the van key to us.

"We arrived yesterday early in the morning and went right to the van. We drove to Grand Rapids and went shopping all day. Choosing the exact rug took a long time." She sighed and looked at her fingernails again.

Neither Clarice nor I said anything. I guess we were both thinking of how it must have been to shop with Mrs. Wiggins. How would she ever make up her mind?

After swallowing loudly, Emily Wiggins started talking again. "We planned to get the six P.M. boat back to Wisconsin last night,

but when we got to the dock, we found that we had just missed it. The next boat wasn't leaving until five A.M. We decided that since we'd saved so much money on buying the rug, we'd rent a motel room and sleep until it was time to get to the boat docks.

"We found a motel and parked the van in the parking lot. I asked my mother to be sure the back of the van was locked, because the rug was there. She said it was fine. But at four-thirty this morning, when we left that motel, we found that the back of the van was all unlocked and the rug had been unprotected all night long."

Clarice's eyebrows shot up. "But the rug was still there?"

"Yes. I was surprised and relieved. It could have easily been stolen, and we were lucky nobody took it. I was so upset I guess I spoke rather harshly to my mother. That's why she insisted on carrying the rug right up into her stateroom this morning.

"But something seemed different to me when we took it out of the van to carry it on board the boat. It's foolish, but I just can't help thinking it was all different somehow."

"Like how?" Clarice asked.

Emily Wiggins bit her bottom lip. "Heavier than I thought it would be, I guess. But I had never lifted a rug like that, so I didn't know exactly how heavy it should have been. It was bulkier than I thought it would be too, and it was hard for even three of us to carry it."

"But at the store when you bought it?" I asked. "Didn't you know how—"

"The people at the store put it into our van. They put the wrapping paper around it and tied it. But I noticed when we took the rug out of the van that the paper seemed different somehow. Wrinkled more, I guess, and tied funny."

She gave a strange sort of laugh; then she shrugged and shook her head. "Oh, this is silly! It's probably all in my imagination, and I'm embarrassed to admit my suspicions. It's just that I keep thinking about those two men who watched us come back to the motel after a late dinner last night. One was tall and not very clean-looking—he had a dark beard stubble and stringy hair. The other was small and slender, and he looked pale, as though he hadn't been out in the sun for a long time."

I gasped and looked over at Clarice, but Emily Wiggins kept talking.

"They both seemed interested when Mother told the clerk to call us for that early-morning car ferry to Wisconsin. They kept staring at us as we went to our room."

She paused. "I got to thinking about that heavy rug and how my mother saw a small man in her stateroom, and how the rug was all heaped up, and I—I—"

There was a light tap at our door. Emily reached over and opened it.

"Emily?" LeeAnn was whispering in the silent hallway. "Mother is asking for you. Can you come right now?"

Emily Wiggins jumped up. "I've got to go. Listen, kids, just forget all my rattling here, will you? It's probably nothing. Just nothing!" She waved, and the door shut behind her.

I jumped off my chair. "That's it! So that's how Norris Rawlings did it!"

Clarice tapped her pencil against her chin. "You think he climbed inside that rug in the motel parking lot?"

"Of course he did! Honestly, Clarice, you're the child genius, aren't you? Anybody with any brains can figure that out. We've got to go tell Mr. Woolsey!"

She frowned. "You don't think the rug would be too uncomfortable? Do you think a person could breathe in there for very long? How did Norris Rawlings think he would get out of there without being seen?"

"Oh, good grief! Don't you see it, Clarice? He probably thought the rug would be taken to the cargo area. Most people would certainly put a huge package like that in the lower deck. He probably thought he could sneak out down there and nobody would see him."

"Then how would he get off the ship?" she asked. "If he left the carpet in the cargo area, how would he get off when we docked? Remember, Flee Jay—he knows the police will watch everybody get on board. He knows they might check all the cargo. He knows the crew will be watching too. Nobody would think to look inside a rug carried by three ladies, but once he climbs out of there, how would he plan to get off in Wisconsin?"

Clarice's questions were like mosquitoes buzzing around my brain, and I wanted to swat them away. "Well, maybe his friend—"

"You think his friend may be on board too?"

I nodded. "Maybe that other man from the motel."

Clarice glanced at her notes. "The one with the beard stubble and the stringy hair?"

"Yes," I said. "Maybe he's going to help Norris Rawlings get off the ship in a *different* way. Maybe—" I stopped with my mouth still hanging open. "The man with the trunk!"

Clarice grinned. "I wondered when you'd think of him."

I could feel my heart hammering. "Could he be the one? When he came on board, the crew checked his trunk. They said it was full of rocks. That means that they won't check it when he leaves."

"And you think Norris Rawlings will be in it then?"

"Don't you think so? My gosh, Clarice, what a great plan!" I grabbed her arm. "Don't you see it, Clarice? The only problem was that Mrs. Wiggins carried her carpet right into her stateroom. So the friend had to take his trunk to his room too. Rawlings must have thought he could use that other shirt to get to the right room before anybody recognized him. Then he could climb into his buddy's trunk! Only Mrs. Wiggins woke up and saw him! That's it! That's it!"

"Is it?"

I straightened up. "Do you really think that man is going to walk off this boat with a trunkful of rocks?"

"Nope."

"Then the trunk must be for Norris Rawlings."

"Not necessarily." Clarice stood up. "You talked to him in the lounge. Do you think he knew anything about rocks?"

"Well, how would I know?"

"Oh, there are lots of ways. I'm going to find out."

"Find out what?"

"Find out about that man in room two."

I stared at her. "You mean just go ask him if he knows Norris Rawlings?"

"Nope." She turned the doorknob. "I'm going to ask him what he knows about rocks. I know a bit myself, so I'll be able to tell if he really studies them."

"I've always thought you were too nosy to be polite," I whispered to her. "But this might be your craziest idea yet. He could be a dangerous criminal, Clarice."

"So you think I shouldn't go?"

I imagined myself sitting alone while Clarice solved the puzzle

of the vanishing villain. I moved toward her. "No. I mean that I'm going to go with you."

The dog yipping down the hall seemed to be warning us as we stepped into the hallway. Clarice reached up and quietly rapped at room two. I held my breath as the door slowly cracked open.

The door jerked open an inch and the man inside stared down at us from its narrow opening. "Could you help me with a science report?" Clarice asked.

He blinked at her. "What?" Then he turned and saw me, and his eyes widened. "More games with your sister?"

"We saw you come on board with that big trunk," Clarice told him, innocently smiling. She might have been selling Girl Scout cookies door to door instead of questioning a possible criminal. "Someone said you had a lot of rocks inside. I've been studying rocks at school. Are you a specialist?"

"Oh." Slumping a bit, the man heaved a great breath and relaxed his grip on the door. "Yes, yes, I'm a specialist," he mumbled, rubbing his chin.

I had been peering into the room but all I could see was the opposite wall. The trunk was there, wide open. And there were rocks lying on the floor all around it. I felt chills race across the back of my neck. Why would he be taking those rocks out inside his stateroom? My throat felt all prickly when the answer hit my brain. I knew for sure that he was emptying that trunk so that Norris Rawlings could climb inside.

Clarice must have had the same thought. "Oh, good," she said brightly, pushing her way inside the stateroom. "I'd like to see your collection." The man jumped out of her way as she elbowed forward.

I don't know which one of us was more scared—the man or me. Clarice just barged forward while the two of us stared as blankly at TV sets in a power failure. She was at that trunk in less than a second. She threw her hands up to her face. "These aren't rocks!" she said. "This trunk is full of—"

"Shhhhh!" Frantically the man pulled me inside and slammed the door.

Later I realized how dumb it was that the two of us had ended up inside a strange man's room. We could have been killed, no doubt about it. But right then I didn't even think of that. He looked a lot more scared than I felt. Besides, Clarice was so horrified by

what she had seen that I had to get to that trunk myself, no matter how horrible the sight inside turned out to be.

I stumbled toward it and caught my breath. It was even worse than I had imagined. There was a huge plastic bag full of melting ice, and there were bags and bags full of—of— Was it a body all cut up? My knees sagged and I leaned forward to get a better look. "Fish!" I croaked.

The man sank into his only chair. "I was just putting in more ice from the snack bar," he explained, as if that cleared up everything.

"But how come—?" My voice was so squeaky I stopped. He looked toward the open trunk, and his tired face broke into a huge grin. "They're trout! More than I ever saw all at once before, and I've been fishing for twenty years. One of them is thirteen pounds!"

"That's a lot more than you're allowed to take out of Michigan," Clarice said.

"I know." He slumped. "It's breaking the law. That's why I had to pretend I was carrying rocks. They were just on the top layer, though. I've already taken them out. Good thing I thought of that, because some fellow looked inside for a quick search before I got on board."

"They weren't looking for fish, though," Clarice said.

"But don't you see why I had to do this?" he asked. "I had to bring back all these fish, or my friends would never believe I caught them. I planned to have a big fish fry at my place tomorrow." He sighed and rubbed his hand across his beard stubble. "I suppose you'll report me now. Harry Dillman's my name. I've been feeling as guilty as a chicken thief, so I won't try to stop you."

My brain was still reeling. "You were smuggling fish?"

He nodded. "First time I've ever really broken the law. I'm a banker, you see, and I usually never even break the speed limit. I always worry about my customers. What would they think? Soon as I got to the dock with this trunk, I was sorry I was doing this. Remember those policemen back there? I was sure they were looking for me. I nearly had a heart attack when that crewman looked inside my trunk. Lucky for me he didn't do a full search. And when that woman screamed later, well, I plain didn't know *what* to think. I haven't had a minute of peace since I started all this."

By this time I was ready to howl. Suddenly the whole thing seemed hilariously funny to me. Clarice and I had barged into his

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stateroom expecting to find an escaped convict and his desperate friend. Instead of that, we had found a scared banker and some dead fish.

He had sunk even lower on his chair. "Then a priest looked at me really funny when I was boarding. I'm sure he suspected something. I'm glad this whole thing is over. Go ahead and report me now. Dillman's my name—Harry Dillman."

I looked at the magazines strewn all over his bed. They were all fishing magazines. The man really was a nut about fishing. "Think we need to tell anybody, Clarice?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nah."

Mr. Dillman jumped to his feet. "Oh, I'd appreciate that, girls. And you can bet that I won't try this foolish trick again! I've learned it's not worth all the worry."

He was still thanking us as we walked out into the dim hallway, but the yipping dog blotted out most of his words.

"So we were all wrong about that trunk," I said once we were back in our stateroom.

Clarice tossed her head. "*I* wasn't wrong. You were."

"Now just a minute here, Clarice! You agreed with me when I said that trunk might have been a good escape route for Norris Rawlings. You said yourself that it wasn't going to leave this ship filled with rocks."

"Sure, I said that. I was pretty sure it was filled with fish all the time. And when you told me that man bought ice at the snack bar, I knew it."

"Oh, come on now! You're a genius, I know that. But how could you know there were fish in there?"

"I smelled them when the trunk was right near us on the deck."

"You did not. How could you? The whole dock area smelled that way."

"The fish smell was at least thirty percent stronger near that trunk. Statistics say that the odor of fish can be—"

"Spare me any more of your boring statistics!"

"You're just mad because you were wrong. Nanny, Nanny, boo, boo. You can't do what I do."

I glared at her. "Don't be so childish, Clarice. I need some quiet in here now so that I can figure out some answers. I've got plenty of clues to think about."

She sat down and started rummaging through her big purse. "But none of the clues make any sense. If you ask me, this whole case seems fishy."

I laughed. "My gosh, Clarice! You made a joke! That's the first time I've ever heard you make a joke."

"What joke?"

"Fishy! You said the case was fishy! And remember what was in the trunk? Fish!"

She stared up at me. "So?"

I felt my smile fade. "So don't you see how funny that is?"

"No."

I plopped down in the chair. "You're hopeless, Clarice. Just hopeless."

She stuck out her tongue and turned to her notebooks. I walked over and looked out the porthole. It was daylight now, but the sky was gloomy and the water was choppy and gray. The mist outside had turned to cold rain. I sighed and stared out into the bleak dawn. My mood was as rotten as the weather.

Ten minutes later Mr. Woolsey came huffing and puffing into our stateroom. "In all my born days," he said, groping over to our only chair, "I have never seen such goings-on. No sir! Not in all my born days! Why, this is worse than the time—"

"What did the captain say about that shirt?" I interrupted.

"Why, there isn't the slightest doubt about it—that shirt belonged to Norris Rawlings, the prisoner from Junction City. The captain was on the radio to shore the minute he finished looking at it, and they confirmed it." He stopped to take a huge breath. "But that's not the really big news."

"You talked to Emily Wiggins," Clarice mumbled, but Mr. Woolsey hadn't heard her.

"I talked to Emily Wiggins," he echoed, his mustache quivering. "You can't imagine the story she told me! I was just on my way back here to see about you two when she caught me in the lounge. You see, Captain Utz just couldn't figure out how that fellow got on board, and that was bothering me, too. We watched every person who boarded, you know. But when Emily Wiggins talked to me, why, I saw plain as day that—"

"He came stowed away inside her rug!" I shouted. "Just the way we were thinking before!"

Mr. Woolsey's mouth dropped open. "Well, how did you girls ever—"

I leaned forward, my heart hammering. "She told us—all about those men at the motel too. When I heard about what went on there, I thought it sounded like Norris Rawlings might have stowed away inside the rolled-up rug. I bet he thought he'd escape when the rug was stored in the cargo area."

"That's just what we thought," Mr. Woolsey said. "Exactly what the captain and I thought. We decided he stole that white shirt so that he could move through the lounge and get down to the cargo deck without being too noticeable."

He shook his head. "It seemed impossible when we thought of this idea earlier, and it seems impossible now. But how else could the man have come aboard? It had to be inside that rug. Of course

I didn't tell Emily Wiggins any of this! No, I just listened politely to her story and then I hightailed it back to Captain Utz. He doesn't want a word of this to leak out to anybody else. Not one word!"

"So you think Norris Rawlings is down on that lower deck right now?" Clarice asked.

"No doubt about it. He would never dare to take a chance hiding out anywhere else, would he? But now the captain has the crew scouring that cargo area with a fine-tooth comb. Oh, they'll find him, all right, they'll find him. And if that friend of his is around, we'll find him, too."

I glanced at Clarice when he mentioned the other man. Poor Mr. Dillman may have been big, with stringy hair, but he wasn't brave enough to help an escaped prisoner. Luckily, Mr. Woolsey hadn't thought about him the way we had.

"That fellow isn't as clever as he might think," he was saying. "No sir! Not when he's dealing with us, anyway."

"If you're sure that's how he got into the stateroom, then how do you think he got out?" Clarice asked.

"He was right behind the door when we all came charging in, just the way we talked about before. That's the only answer. We were all so interested in looking at Mrs. Wiggins that no one noticed him flattened against the wall. Then the mob got so big in that room that nobody could see who was who. Rawlings just walked out with everybody else when I chased the mob out of the room. Since he wasn't wearing that jail shirt, he looked just like any other passenger."

"But that idea just doesn't fit the facts," Clarice said. "The jail shirt was dropped outside this door a long time after the mob went down the hallway. How did it get back outside the door if Norris Rawlings hurried right down to the cargo area?"

Like a balloon collapsing, Mr. Woolsey's chest caved in. He frowned, and his eyebrows wiggled. "Well!" he said loudly. "Well!"

I was used to dealing with Clarice and all her picky questions. "Oh, honestly, Clarice! That shirt isn't important. It doesn't matter how it got there. Maybe he dropped it when he went through the lounge and somebody else picked it up and left it there because Mrs. Wiggins was carrying on so much about a lost shirt."

Mr. Woolsey beamed at me. "That's it, of course. That's it." Then the smile left his face and he cleared his throat importantly.

"Now, then, I have a question to ask you about *your* behavior. Heaven knows I've been busy chasing after an invisible man, but I'm still responsible for you two. Did you leave this room after I told you not to? Because Miss Wiggins said she saw you coming out of another stateroom."

Clarice smiled an innocent, little-girl smile. She rubbed the lace collar on her dress and batted her eyes. "We only went to ask the man next door about rocks, Mr. Woolsey. We didn't think you'd mind if we were doing homework. Mother wanted us to do homework on this trip. And the man next door said he was a rock specialist."

"Oh." Mr. Woolsey teetered a moment, as if unsure what he should do or say next. Then he stood up. "Well, as long as you're doing what your mother tells you to do . . . But I wouldn't want you doing anything foolish. Stay away from that lower deck, for instance."

Seeing how successful Clarice had been with her Little Miss Innocent act, I tried the same idea. A perfect hiding place for Norris Rawlings had popped into my head. Even though I knew it was dumb, I still wanted to play a part in solving some of the puzzles. "Mother said we should get plenty of fresh air," I said.

Mr. Woolsey looked toward our porthole. The day was still gray and gloomy, but the rain had stopped.

"We've been shut in here a long time," I went on, "and there's a funny chemical smell in here. Could we just step out on the main deck to get some fresh air?"

I knew that the smell was simply from Clarice's disinfectant, but Mr. Woolsey didn't know her weird habits. She'd wiped the wall before she put her head against it as she sat on her bed. Mr. Woolsey sniffed, then nodded. "Yes, yes, I can see that you ought to have some fresh air." He reached for the door. "I don't see any problem if you stay near all the other passengers, girls. That Rawlings fellow is going to stay as far away from the others as he can. It's a sure thing that he won't be promenading on the main deck. I guess you could go for a few moments. But be sure to put your sweaters on. It's chilly out there." He left in a flurry of dog barks.

As soon as the door had shut behind him, I turned to Clarice. "I've thought of the perfect hiding place for Norris Rawlings!"

Clarice tapped her chin with her pencil. "Emily Wiggins told us

not to tell anybody that story, and then she went ahead and told Mr. Woolsey all about what happened at the motel herself."

"Didn't you hear me?" I asked. "I said I've thought of the perfect hiding place for Norris Rawlings."

"If you thought of it, it can't be perfect, Flee Jay." Sighing, she tucked her notebooks into her huge purse. "But I'll go along outside with you. Maybe I can get a few notes about the winds."

As we stepped out into the corridor I saw Mrs. Potter ahead of us carrying Lionel toward the lounge door.

"Oh no!" I said. "Will we have to put up with that dog even when we get outside?"

Clarice shrugged. "So where's the perfect hiding place?" she asked as we moved across the lounge.

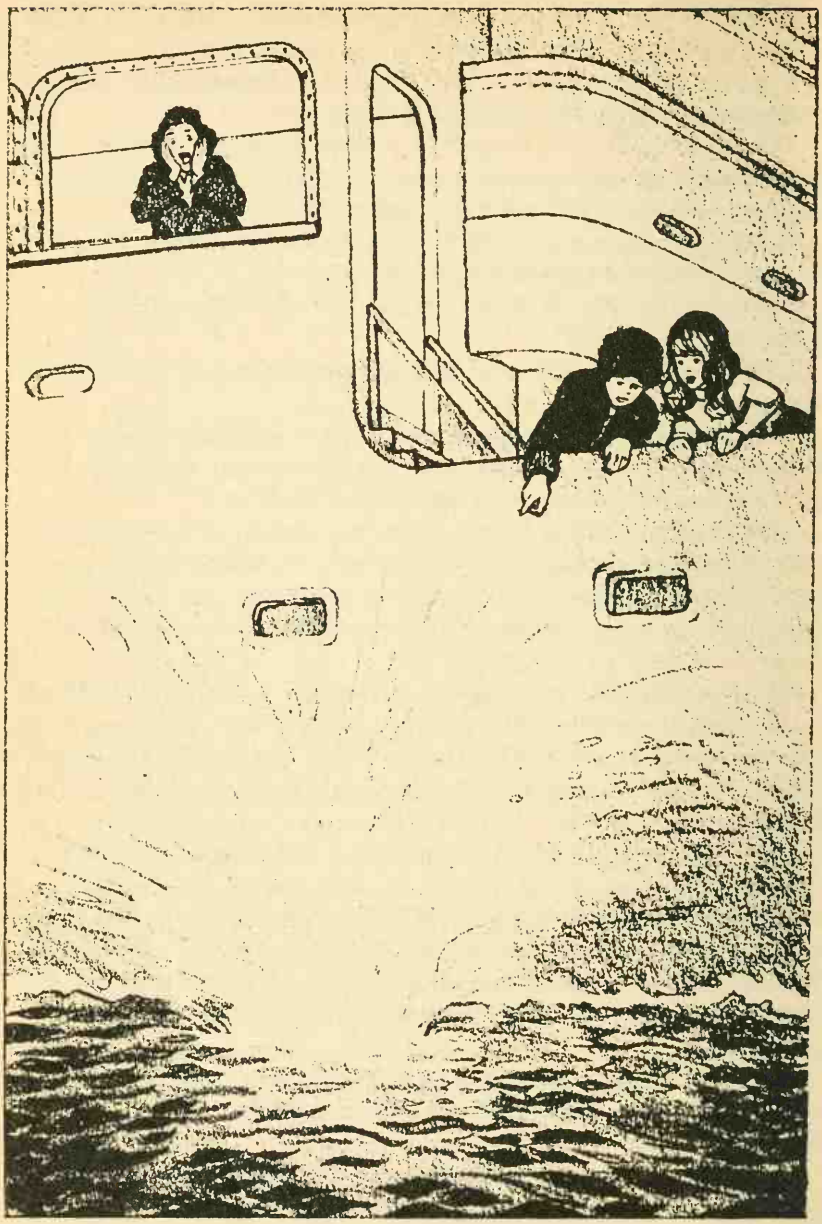
"In the lifeboats!" I whispered. "I'll bet you that nobody will think to look in them. Maybe the crew is searching the cargo deck all over, but is anybody thinking of those lifeboats?"

Clarice glanced at me, and I saw a glimmer of respect in her eyes. "Maybe," she said. "Maybe. I guess it wouldn't hurt to check there. So far nothing I've thought of has made any sense." She opened her purse and pulled out her flashlight as we headed for the deck.

The wind felt cold and damp as the lounge door slammed behind us. The whole deck was wet, and the fog clung to it, almost misting like smoke above the metal. The boat was heaving up and down, for the waves were high and choppy. Inside the lounge I had almost forgotten that we were on rough water, but now I suddenly felt queasy. Clarice and I stood at the railing and tried to see down to the water churning below. The waves were frothy right beneath us, but in the distance it was hard to tell where the cold gray water ended and the cold gray sky began. As I looked down, my stomach heaved. "I'd sure hate to end up down there," I mumbled. "If the water didn't get you, then the motor would pull you into the propellers and . . ."

"No, not really," Clarice said. "You have to think about the movement of the boat and the current of the waters. I think that—"

"Oh, just forget it!" I snapped. "A person can't even die without you telling her how to do it!" I stomped off toward the side of the deck where two big lifeboats were fastened near the metal stairway



leading to the lookout deck above us. I heard Clarice's footsteps following behind me, but it was dark and gloomy now that the upper deck was over my head. I heard footsteps up there, too, clanking against the metal floor. The fog was clumped between the passageway, and I felt it wrap around me as I walked through the misty shadows.

Then I was at the lifeboats. They hung just ahead, ready to be launched in seconds, and both of them were covered with tarp. As I heard Clarice's footsteps draw closer I tried to imagine what I would do if I looked inside one of those lifeboats and saw eyes peering out. I decided that I would drop dead on the spot. *Girl frightened to death by nesting seagulls,* my death certificate would say.

"Those tarps look pretty secure to me," Clarice said behind me. "Nobody could climb inside one of them and then cover up so perfectly. I don't think Rawlings is hidden anywhere near here."

Just as she finished talking there was a sound near the top of the stairway. I glanced up into the shadowy darkness there. "Want to go up to the lookout deck? Maybe we can—"

And then a lot of things happened at once. As hard as I try, I can't remember exactly what followed what, because I was so scared and so confused. I know there were running footsteps overhead, and I know I heard Lionel bark like crazy, the sound muffled and eerie in the fog. Then there was a huge splash in the water, followed by a woman's scream. "Man overboard!" she screamed. "Help! Somebody help him!"

Clarice gasped, and her flashlight clunked to the floor. I grabbed at the railing.

There was a clattering on the metal stairway, and Mrs. Potter came swooping down out of the mist, her gray hair plastered across her forehead. "A man just jumped overboard! Stop the boat! Throw him something! Do something! Help him! Help him!"

In only seconds, it seemed, two crewmen were there, jumping out of the fog, shouting and running. Someone must have called the bridge, because the boat suddenly shuddered and jerked, and it churned, trying to stop in the water. A marker went sailing out of the mist and landed *kerplunk* in the lake, a tiny blinking light flickering in the fog, a cork floating in the ocean.

All this time Mrs. Potter was shrieking and Lionel was barking. "He jumped right over the railing! I had my dog up there for a walk, and this man came dashing right out of the shadows. He shouted out something about not wanting to live anymore, and then he jumped right over the railing. Oh, it was awful! Awful!"

Suddenly I found myself screaming as loudly as she was. "We heard him fall right into the water! Over there—over there!" Someone threw out another marker where I was pointing, and a whole mob of people crowded around us.

"Are we sinking?"

"Why're we stopping?"

"Do we need to get into the lifeboats?"

People were all shouting and screaming. "No, we didn't see him fall," I heard Clarice telling a crewman. "We only heard the splash out there in the water."

"What's going on now?" Mr. Woolsey came running from the lounge. "What's happened?"

"A man!" Mrs. Potter screamed. "I saw a man jump overboard!"

By then a raft was in the water, and the lifeboats were being lowered. Mr. Woolsey tried to calm everybody, but it was like expecting gasoline to put out a fire. I hardly remember what he said as he dashed around. My head was hammering and my stomach was knotted. The man overboard had to be Norris Rawlings, I told myself. But it seemed awful, awful, that anybody would choose to die by jumping into the icy water of Lake Michigan rather than go on living. In my mind I saw him sink under the gray, choppy waves.

"You'd better get back to your stateroom, girls," Mr. Woolsey told us between his shouts to the other passengers. "I'll check in with you later. Go ahead now, go ahead!"

I saw a few familiar faces as Clarice and I wormed our way through the crowd. There was that old couple, walking faster than I had imagined they could. The priest was hurrying behind one of the foreign women. Just as we went into the lounge Emily Wiggins dashed out, her face all white and trembling. "Did someone really drown? What's happened?" Someone behind us shouted something about a suicide, so she didn't wait for our answer.

As we came into the stateroom corridor I saw Mr. Dillman standing at the doorway to his room, peering anxiously into the lounge. "Why have we stopped?" he whispered, blinking his eyes and biting his lip. "What's the matter? What's the matter?"

I knew he probably thought the captain had stopped the ship in order to arrest him for catching too many trout, so I told him someone had jumped overboard. He tried to look sad and concerned, but he couldn't quite hide his relief.

I was wet all over. As soon as Clarice and I stepped into our room, I threw my jacket on our chair and fell down on my bed. Clarice neatly hung her sweater on the back of the chair and settled into her thinking position on her bed. She placed her head exactly on the spot on the wall where she had used her rubbing alcohol. "It doesn't make sense that he tried to kill himself now," she said. "He was nearly free."

I didn't bother to answer. My whole world felt soggy. It had been fun to think I might solve a mystery, but it wasn't fun at all to know that somebody had just died. The ferry whistle blasted again and again, and the sounds it made in the fog seemed like mournful moans.

When a helicopter sounded, Clarice moved to the porthole. "It's from the Coast Guard," she told me. "They're swooping over the water where those markers are. The lifeboats are out there too, but nobody in that water could still be alive. Even if they could swim, they'd be dead from hypothermia by now. The water temperature—"

"I know all about it, Clarice," I mumbled, flipping over to look up at the ceiling.

She plopped back down on her bed. "It doesn't make any sense, Flee Jay. We were almost to Wisconsin. Norris Rawlings was almost free."

I turned to look toward her. "He had to get off the boat somehow,

didn't he? Once Mrs. Wiggins gave the alarm, he must have known that he'd be caught."

"Still, though . . ." She rummaged in her huge purse and pulled out a notebook. "I wonder if I wrote down anything that might help."

Sighing, I stared up at the ceiling again. I wondered how Clarice had ever lived for nine months in the womb without her ubiquitous notebooks. Soon the boat started moving again, but she hardly looked up from her scribbling. Heavy rain began drumming against the boat.

Almost half an hour later, Mr. Woolsey tapped at our door. His mustache was wet and drooping, and his usually rosy face was gray and sad. "I'm going to have to go change my uniform, girls, but I wanted to be sure you were all right. I've been up with the captain, keeping in touch with the Coast Guard by radio. They've got the cutter out with our men in the boats back there now."

"Did they find anything yet?"

"No, and I doubt that they will. They'll be giving up the search soon. What a terrible thing!"

"Do you think it was really Norris Rawlings?" Clarice asked.

"Oh, there's no doubt of that. No doubt at all. Everybody else on board has been accounted for. We've checked that question thoroughly, and we have exactly the right number of passengers and crew members, so nobody else could have jumped overboard."

Sighing, he shook his head. "We've spread a bit of a rumor. We didn't want the passengers to know an escaped prisoner had been on board, so we've passed the word that a crewman went berserk and jumped over the side. But it was Norris Rawlings, all right. It had to be."

Clarice frowned. "It doesn't make any sense!"

Mr. Woolsey sighed. "Not everything in life has to make sense, little lady. You'll find that out as you get older." He reached for the door, then turned back. "The captain has announced that the company will give free doughnuts and hot drinks to everybody out in the lounge. Maybe the two of you should get some hot chocolate."

It sounded good to me. I was tired of lying there all lonely and depressed while Clarice scribbled. She gathered up her notes while I tried to smooth out some of the wrinkles in my clothes and the frizz in my hair. I looked like a walking ad for a laundry softener.

"I'll see you as soon as I've changed," Mr. Woolsey told us when we stepped into the hallway.

"Mrs. Potter and Lionel are back in their room," I said to Clarice as we moved in the opposite direction. "Listen to that dog bark! I bet that he'd bark if a butterfly flew down this hallway."

"But that's impossible, Flee Jay," she told me. "This is much too early in the season for butterflies to be out."

I glared at her. "Honestly, Clarice! I only meant that Lionel barks at everything. He's barked every time anybody has set foot in this hallway."

We were in the lounge now, and I saw that all the passengers there looked as limp and worn as I felt. They were draped all over the chairs and sofas, drinking their free drinks, but they didn't seem to be enjoying them very much. They looked like people visiting a funeral parlor. I heard a lot of whispering about the disturbed crewman who had jumped overboard. None of the stateroom passengers was in sight.

Clarice looked around the room. "I wonder if Emily Wiggins will be coming out. I wanted to ask her why she told us not to tell anybody about that motel business and then she went right over and told Mr. Woolsey herself."

I shook my head. "You mean you'd go right up and ask her a thing like that?"

"Sure. I'd like to set the record straight for my notes."

"Sounds plain nosy to me." I sniffed, and the aroma of chocolate perked my spirits. "Want some hot chocolate now?"

"I wonder about that other man she said she saw too."

"Go sit by the windows," I said, "and I'll bring something over to you." I could see that she was too wrapped up in deep thoughts to worry about eating. Most of my deep thoughts are on that very subject.

"Okay. But don't forget the napkins, Flee Jay."

I groaned. "As if I could!" There are a lot of things I might forget about my sister, but her need for napkins is not one of them.

Just to cheer myself up, I bought two candy bars to eat while I drank my hot chocolate. That's one thing to be thankful for with Clarice—she doesn't eat candy because she says it isn't good for her teeth. Mine have so much metal on that I don't think they even notice a bit of sugar now and then.

Clarice sipped and dabbed her way through a cup of hot chocolate and six napkins. I watched the rain stream down the lounge windows and I stared at all the other passengers. The throb of the motors and the movement of the ship were making me feel groggy, so I tried to get my mind active. After all, I kept telling myself, this trip actually was the most exciting event of my life.

But what good is excitement if nobody else knows about it?

"Don't you wish we could stand up and shout the truth to everyone?" I finally asked.

Clarice looked up from her notebooks. "But we don't know the truth."

"We could shout out what we do know, I mean. We know that Norris Rawlings escaped from jail and got on this boat hidden inside a rolled-up carpet. We know he scared Mrs. Wiggins right out of her wits in her stateroom. And then he stole that shirt. We know he's dead now."

Clarice shook her head. "We only think we know those things." She opened her ugly purse and dragged out another notebook. "Just let me check a few facts here. Now that I've been fortified with nourishment, I may be able to deduce something."

I sighed. "You simply drank some hot chocolate, Clarice, and now you're going to make a few guesses. Can't you just say it that way?"

She crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. "Nanny, nanny, boo, boo. You're just mad because you can't say things the way I say them."

There were a lot of things I wanted to say in answer to that, but I swallowed my words. It's a good thing words don't have calories, because I swallow a lot of them when I'm around Clarice.

I only wish she'd swallow a few herself once in a while.

As the minutes passed I got tired of seeing her fiddle with her notes. All the other passengers around us seemed to have someone to talk to. Finally I leaned forward. "So what brilliant idea are you coming up with?"

"It's not *my* brilliant idea," she mumbled. "It's yours, Flee Jay, and because of it, I think I'm finally getting close to some answers."

"Mine?" I jerked up, so surprised I nearly fell off my chair. And also I guess I was flattered. It wasn't very often that Clarice liked my ideas. "What did I say?"

"When we came into the lounge just now. Remember what you said?"

I squirmed. If there is anything worse than having somebody forget what you've said to them, it's having them remember it when you've forgotten it yourself.

"You said that Lionel barked at everybody who walked in that hallway. Most dogs bark at strangers. But they don't bark at people they know."

"So?" I asked. "So?"

"So I've been looking at my notes. Lionel didn't bark at everybody in that hallway."

I flopped back against my chair. My sister's genius brain was obviously getting waterlogged. "So? Maybe he was sleeping when somebody passed. Maybe he only snarled and you didn't hear him."

"Maybe." Clarice's eyebrows wiggled doubtfully under her straight bangs. "Maybe."

Moments later she looked up again. "Will the police be there at the dock looking for Norris Rawlings when we dock in Milwaukee now?"

"Now?" I sniffed. "Where have you been? Norris Rawlings isn't with us anymore. The police aren't going to lie in wait for a dead man."

Clarice tapped her teeth with her pencil. "Hmmmmm," she mumbled occasionally. "Hmmmmm."

"You're hopeless," I said. I dug in my purse and pulled out my comb and mirror. My hair was hopeless too, but I tried to fluff it up so I'd look presentable when we docked. "I sure get tired of trying to fix up this dumb hair!" I muttered.

"That's it!" Clarice shot forward on her chair, and several notebooks clattered to the floor. "I know all the answers now!"

I stared at her. "What answers?"

"How Norris Rawlings did all the things he did. I know how he disappeared."

"The whole boat knows how he disappeared. He jumped into the water. He's dead, Clarice."

She shook her head. "Oh no, I don't think so. No, he's not dead. Not dead at all. He only wants everyone to think he's dead so that he can get off in Milwaukee without any problem."

"Are you crazy? Of course he's dead! Nobody could survive in that cold water for very long, Clarice. You're the expert on hypothermia—you ought to know that."

"He didn't die, Flee Jay. I'm sure of it."

I felt chills gallop up and down my spine. Her voice was so creepy-sounding that I whispered my question. "You think he was able to swim over and cling to the boat somehow? You think he's still running around free on board somewhere?"

"I don't think he ever went into the water."

"But Mrs. Potter *saw* him. We heard him!"

"How do we know that she really saw him? How do we know that we really heard him? Think about it, Flee Jay. The deck was full of shadows, and the air was all misty and foggy. We heard those footsteps clanging on the metal overhead and then we heard the splash. Mrs. Potter started screaming and the dog started barking and everybody went wild. Maybe we only heard the splash because Mrs. Potter threw something into the water herself. Maybe she threw a lounge chair overboard and then started screaming about a man in the water."

"But why would Mrs. Potter say—"

Clarice grinned. "She lied. That's what confused me, but now I know that's what happened. I think she lied about seeing somebody jump overboard. She must be a friend of Norris Rawlings. Lots of times people lie for their friends. I'm sure Norris Rawlings is still on board, Flee Jay! I'm sure of it." She leaned closer. "And know what?"

My mouth was hanging open, but I managed to gulp one word. "What?"

"I think I know exactly where he is!"

"B-b-bu-but how could you know that?"

"The answers are all there, Flee Jay. We've seen all the clues. And now I've finally been able to put them all together!" She grabbed her purse. "I'd better go tell Mr. Woolsey all about this right now before we dock! Pick up my notebooks there, will you?"

She ran off before I could stop her. I was about to shout after her when the ferry whistle blasted a mighty sound. It was the signal for land.

I sighed and slumped back in my chair, certain that my sister had flipped right out. After all, I was the one who knew about mysteries, I was the one who wanted to be a detective. And as far as I was concerned, Norris Rawlings was dead. Clarice was going to make a complete fool out of herself.

I kept telling myself that, but a tiny voice in my brain kept whispering that maybe, just maybe, Clarice had found some real answers. I frowned and wondered what they might be as I bent over to pick up the notebooks.

Parade of Suspects

Slowly the stateroom passengers drifted back into the lounge. Clarice still hadn't come back, so I studied them, wondering which ones might know something about Norris Rawlings. If Clarice was right, some of these people were not at all what they pretended to be.

I had a lot of weird thoughts race around inside my head as I watched them. Some of my ideas were so dumb I'm embarrassed to admit them now. First I noticed Mr. Dillman and his ridiculous trunk. He was half dragging it into the lounge now, trying to seem perfectly normal as he prepared to get off the boat. He looked so nervous, though, that I imagined Norris Rawlings all curled up inside just waiting to jump out and start running amok. I knew exactly what was inside the trunk, but still...

That old couple were already at the lounge windows, peering out into the mist. They had their travel bags near them, and they were bundled up in their huge coats and hats. As we drew nearer to the dock the ferry whistle blasted again, and it startled the old man. I tried to remember whether he was the one who was hard of hearing, or whether it was his wife. Then I wondered why they both were peering out the window so intently if one of them was almost blind.

Jason and his mother were sitting in the far section by the blank video screen. She looked worn and tired, and Jason was almost asleep on her lap. At first I told myself that a young mother like that wouldn't be guilty of anything, and then I told myself that she'd be the perfect person to help an escaped prisoner, because nobody would suspect her.

The priest was standing by the bulletin board, reading all the ads and notices. Maybe, I told myself, maybe he was looking for a barber who could do something with his strange hair. The dampness had hardly changed its bushy, plastic look. I patted my own hair and watched Mrs. Potter come into the lounge.

She had obnoxious Lionel in her arms, and she hurried over to sit by a window. A fat man there quickly moved off when the dog snarled at him. I tried to remember if Lionel had barked at everybody who went up or down that hallway, but my brain was mush. Darn that Clarice—she had told me just enough to drive me crazy. I

flipped open one of her notebooks, but I could hardly read her scribbles. It was easier for me to try to figure out my own answers.

I waved at Emily and LeeAnn as they helped their mother up to the snack-bar counter. Poor LeeAnn—her hair looked as bad as ever, but Emily looked fine. Mrs. Wiggins seemed so weak and weary that I doubted that even coffee would perk up her spirits. I wondered if Emily had told her what we suspected about her rug. It wasn't with them, so I decided they were going to get some crew members to carry it off the boat.

The two foreign women were sitting close together near an exit, obviously eager for the door to open as soon as we reached land. They had their faces and bodies covered, just as they had had from the beginning of the trip. Their long dresses were gray, almost the same color as Norris Rawlings's jail shirt had been.

I sighed. Nobody looked suspicious, and yet everybody looked suspicious. How could Clarice know someone had lied? We would be docking in five minutes, and everybody would be going off in dozens of directions at once. You couldn't make people stay someplace just because a ten-year-old thought someone had lied, even if that ten-year-old did happen to be a certified genius.

I heaved another sigh and moved the hands back an hour on my watch, all set now with Wisconsin time. The motors churning down below changed their rhythm. The ship was turning around so that it could back into the dock. In moments everybody would be hurrying down the gangplank, and we'd probably never know all the answers.

Just then Clarice came running from the stateroom corridor. She was grinning like a dog who has just eaten the cat's food. Mr. Woolsey and four men were hurrying in after her. The captain's mate was there too, with his spiffy uniform jacket buttoned up all wrong. I jumped up and hurried toward them as they stood looking around the lounge.

"Did you tell them which ones you think lied about Norris Rawlings?" I whispered to Clarice.

Her grin got even bigger. "I told them which one *is* Norris Rawlings," she said.

The captain's mate and Mr. Woolsey moved with two men directly over in front of Mrs. Wiggins and her two daughters. Clarice pulled me right behind them, while the other two men went on.

Mr. Woolsey tipped his hat. "The captain would like to have you and your family wait in our empty stateroom until we dock, ma'am," he said.

Mrs. Wiggins glanced at LeeAnn. The captain's mate and another man were on either side of her.

Emily stepped forward. "We aren't interested in waiting in a stateroom," she said.

"Then I must insist," the captain's mate told her, taking LeeAnn's arm. He nodded, and the other man reached for her other arm.

LeeAnn tried to yank both arms away. "No!" Her voice was deep and rumbly—a man's voice!

"We know it's you, Rawlings," Mr. Woolsey said. He was holding Mrs. Wiggins's arm. The other crewman grabbed Emily's. "Come quietly," Mr. Woolsey whispered, "and it will be a lot easier for all of you. Give up, Rawlings, and nobody will be hurt. Don't alarm the passengers."

"But you're making a terrible mistake," Mrs. Wiggins cried as the whole group was being pulled over toward the stateroom corridor. "We'll sue you!" LeeAnn was struggling so hard that her hair slipped to one side.

"You'll have the Milwaukee police to complain to," Mr. Woolsey told Mrs. Wiggins. "Thanks to those two kids, we know exactly what went on here!"

My mouth had dropped open at the sight of LeeAnn's crooked wig. It *was* Norris Rawlings!

The other two crewmen hurried along with Mrs. Potter and her dog. She was demanding to know what was happening, but her voice sounded more scared than angry. Lionel was snarling in her arms, still as ferocious as ever.

Everyone in the lounge stood watching the strange procession as it disappeared into the stateroom corridor. For a few seconds there

was a stunned silence. Then the ferry whistle blasted and the whole ship shuddered. We were at the dock.

"Land ho!" some bearded guy shouted, and then all the passengers were laughing and looking for their luggage. The wild scene by the stateroom corridor seemed to have been instantly forgotten.

I whirled around to face Clarice. "*LeeAnn* was Norris Rawlings?"

Grinning, Clarice nodded. "They're going to hold all four of them in that stateroom until the Milwaukee police come on board. As soon as I told him what I thought, Captain Utz got on the ship-to-shore radio. He talked to the police in Michigan and in Wisconsin and he found out all about Norris Rawlings's family."

My head was spinning with questions. "But how did—"

"They're settled in there now," Mr. Woolsey said, coming back out of the corridor. His face was rosy and happy again. "They think they would have pulled this whole stunt off if it hadn't been for you two kids. You ought to hear them blaming one another in there! Rawlings wanted to toss that poor dog overboard since he's the one who fouled up their plan. But Mrs. Potter said she wasn't going to leave her dog at home, no matter what."

He was hurrying to help the last straggling passengers out of the lounge, but he managed to call back one more thing. "The captain wants to talk to you two. He's relieved that this whole business didn't cause any fuss or panic. That was good thinking, girls, mighty good thinking!"

"I told them that you helped me figure the whole thing out," Clarice said.

"Me? But I don't even know what's going on around here, Clarice!"

"You got me thinking about that dog and all that barking, didn't you? Dogs don't bark at people they know. I noticed that he barked every time anybody was in that hallway, but when Emily and LeeAnn were at our door, he didn't make a sound. Remember when LeeAnn came to get Emily? The hallway was so quiet we heard her whisper. I knew then that Lionel knew them both."

She shoved her purse up farther on her arm. "Then I got to thinking—if he knew them, then Mrs. Potter must have known them too. But Emily Wiggins told us she had to talk to us about those men at her motel because she just had to tell somebody. If

she knew Mrs. Potter, then why didn't she talk to somebody she knew?"

Clarice didn't wait for me to answer. "And another thing . . . She said we shouldn't mention it when she told us about the rug business at the motel, but then she went and told Mr. Woolsey about it herself. She also told him where we'd gone, so I knew she'd been watching us. I decided she had *wanted* us to spread the word about those men and the rug, and when we didn't do it, she had to do it herself."

"But why would they want—"

"So everyone would think that Norris Rawlings was on board. Then he could pretend to jump overboard and be dead! Don't you see that, Flee Jay? You're the one who said that the police wouldn't search for a dead man. That was the final piece to the puzzle. Mrs. Potter lied about seeing somebody jump overboard. And just as I figured, there *is* a deck chair missing up on that top deck. She tossed it to make the big splash. They planned that phony suicide right from the beginning. The fog and the rain made it even easier because hardly anybody was out on deck. You and I were supposed to be the witnesses."

My head was reeling. The boat was steady now, but I felt seasick from all the things whirling around in my brain.

"So Mrs. Wiggins lied about seeing somebody in her stateroom . . ."

"Sure. And Emily probably threw that shirt out into the hallway right after she left us so we'd find evidence of that prisoner."

"But how come they all lied and pretended and—"

"They did it because they're all his family! They changed their names for this trip, and they planned to get off in Milwaukee and keep going west. Mrs. Wiggins is Norris Rawlings's mother. Emily is his sister. Mrs. Potter is his aunt. They worked all these ideas out even before they helped him escape from the jail. The police told Captain Utz that they've been trying to reach the family by phone, but they never had any answers."

I took a deep breath. So the whole thing did make sense, even though it all had seemed absolutely impossible. With enough people helping him, Norris Rawlings had been able to make us all believe that he was loose and running around the ship, while at the same time he stayed right in front of us, disguised as his own sister. I

slumped. I thought I could be a great detective, but I hadn't figured out one single answer.

I hated to ask, but I had to. "How'd you know that LeeAnn was really Norris Rawlings?"

Clarice shrugged. "Lots of ways. First of all, I got to thinking that LeeAnn never *said* anything. The only time she talked, it was in a little whisper. Then I got to thinking about that scene at Mrs. Wiggins's stateroom door when all that screaming was going on. LeeAnn was still wearing her jacket, but Emily was just wearing a short-sleeved blouse. I wondered why two people in the same stateroom were dressed so different."

She paused and flipped back her perfect hair. "And then there was the *big* clue . . ."

"Well?" I prompted her. "Well?"

"LeeAnn's hair was so awful. I guess they figured a frizzy wig would look more natural. At first it did. I mean it looked a lot like your hair, Flee Jay, kind of like naturally curly hair that gets all kinked up. But you're always trying to make yours look better. LeeAnn never even touched hers. I knew then that 'she' couldn't be real."

As Clarice was explaining I was patting down my frizzy hair, but I stopped with my hand stuck in midair. "I think I'm going to toss you overboard right this minute, you little twerp!" I muttered.

Grinning, Clarice swung her purse and whirled around to run to the deck. "Nanny, nanny, boo, boo. You can't do what I do," she called as she hurried off.

So that's the whole story. Did you figure out the right answers?

I just don't think any normal person could do it. I mean, who except Clarice scribbles down every detail she sees and hears? Who carries all that information around in a big black bag? Who else stands in sinks and knocks on the doors of strangers? Who remembers all the clothes people wear and blurts out peculiar questions? Is there anybody else in the whole world even remotely like my sister? No!

So you can see why I need your help. If you agree that nobody else in the universe could have come up with the right answer, I won't feel so bad about failing as a detective on my very first case.

Please let me know if you understand. Here's how . . .

The next time you're at a huge shopping mall and you see two girls, one slender with long blond hair, and the other one looking kind of fat, frazzled, and frizzled, it'll probably be Clarice and me. Especially if the older girl is eating a double-dip ice-cream cone, with one dip chocolate and one strawberry, and the other girl is carrying a big black plastic bag with rhinestones on the handle.

If you agree with me about his case, wink three times to let me know. It'll make me feel good to know you understand.

Don't worry if you make a mistake and that girl isn't me. I suspect other fat, frazzled, frizzled girls are a lot like me, so go ahead and wink anyway. It'll be great to get the attention. We may not all have a sister like Clarice, but I'll tell you something, and I know that it's the truth—all of us need plenty of friendly understanding.

So blink, blink, blink.

Thank you.

From Felice Jennifer Saylor,
Girl Detective

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TUCSON, AZ 85717

YOU FIGURE IT OUT!

My sister Clarice seems to have everything going for her. Long blond hair, perfect skin, a high IQ...and luck like you wouldn't believe.

So when Clarice and I (they call me Flee Jay) find ourselves trapped on a car ferry in the middle of Lake Michigan with an escaped convict and everyone running around like chickens–guess who turns out to be the hero who figures the whole thing out? My wonderful sister Clarice, of course!

It's got to be luck, and I'm going to prove it. I've written down exactly what happened during that harrowing voyage–every clue, every suspicion, and a description of every weird and wacky person aboard. I just want to see if anybody else in the whole world could come up with the same right answer Clarice did!

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